**Assessment and Problem-Based Learning in the Law Curriculum: The PREPS Framework** by Anil Balan, London, London Publishing Partnership, 2023, 1st edition, 195 pp., £29.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-913019-94-5

Since early 2020, the pressures on assessment strategies at UK law schools have been unremitting. Innovations triggered by the pandemic went significantly beyond shifting existing practices online. Then, as the UK emerged from COVID lockdowns and appeared to be moving, generally, towards “normality”; the impact of generative AI on legal education (and practice) emerged as a pedagogically pressing concern. These contemporary challenges interact with established issues in legal education, including discussion about the purpose of assessment, employability and the legal professions, and “authentic” assessment.

Balan’s *Assessment and Problem-Based Learning in the Law Curriculum: The PREPS Framework* is a valuable contribution to discussion on assessment and undergraduate law course design. It serves as both a detailed account of qualitative legal education research — involving interviews with academics at Balan’s, then, own institution (the University of East London) and other comparable institutions — and a resource for educators (re-)designing curricula. The titular PREPS framework consists of themes of ‘teaching for professional *practice*, teaching for *resilience* and engagement, teaching that adapts to the *environment*, teaching to respond to challenges of vocational *pedagogies,* and teaching to integrate academic and vocational *skills*’ (p.51, emphasis in original). Each theme is the subject of one of the latter five chapters, with the first four outlining methodology and exploring wider literature related to these themes.

Problem-based learning is discussed throughout, but perhaps most prominently in Chapter Five, which explores preparation for practice. Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that Balan’s discussion focuses on ‘designing assessments that closely mirror the challenges and tasks faced by legal professionals’ (p.58) and there is less consideration of subject areas with limited direct connections to legal practice — a category which might include legal history or jurisprudence — where a broader conceptualisation of authenticity might be required. Nevertheless, Balan does state, in an earlier chapter, that ‘[t]he argument that legal education should not be purely vocational … is compelling’ (p.13) suggesting the framework might be adaptable to address these subject areas.

Balan draws attention to the comparison between PREPS and the CARE framework developed by Tsaoussi in their article ‘Using Soft Skills Courses to Inspire Law Teachers: a new methodology for a more humanistic legal education’ in *The Law Teacher.[[1]](#footnote-1)* Balan critiques aspects of CARE because of ‘the heavy loads it places on teachers and the difficulty of maintaining student motivation’ (p.50) and suggests that PREPS offers a more developed framework built on empirical data. For example, in Chapter Six, Balan contrasts CARE’s *attentive* teaching with the *resilience* and engagement focus of PREPS. Balan argues that the ‘resilience and engagement principle goes further than attentive teaching by placing an emphasis on students from widening participation backgrounds’ (p.77). On the one hand, PREPS engages more explicitly with curriculum design, in contrast to CARE’s arguably more ‘humanistic’ focus on individual educators’ practice. Consequently, Balan is able to provide examples of interventions around resilience occurring beyond formalised learning, such as those involving student societies and peer-mentoring schemes (p.87-88), which support this emphasis. On the other hand, such interventions do remain vulnerable to similar challenges around staff workload if they are to be supported and integrated into the curriculum effectively.

Whilst Balan suggests most of the themes he develops share parallels or commonalities with principles of the CARE framework, Chapter Seven discusses *adaptation* which is said to ‘represent a new element that is not part of the CARE framework at all, since it is based very much on the context in which this book was caried out’, namely adaptations to the COVID pandemic (p.169). This theme also explores technological developments (including, briefly, AI) which may impact legal education. The need to engage with professional ethics is presented as one key recommendation of this Chapter, which suggests there are general benefits of preparing students to enter a changing world as well as specific benefits to preparing those who will enter practice to adapt to changes in law and the challenges facing society (p.118).

Each Chapter concludes with ‘Hints and Tips’ related to the focus of the chapter, which serves to underscore the book’s usefulness as a reference point for academics developing their practice. In Chapter Eight, this section highlights the need to ensure that teaching and learning develop over modules, building up as a course of study, and that courses are attentive to their role in students’ educational and career journeys with calls for ‘[c]urriculum mapping [and] collaboration among faculty members’ (p.150). Arguably, given the high number of students moving institutions at different stages of their education, this call might also be extended beyond individual faculties and prompt more consideration of how courses within and beyond individual institutions connect with one another.

Chapter Nine highlights other avenues of collaboration, including guest lectures from practitioners and professionals, and utilising connections with alumni to enhance students’ experience and learning. To some extent, such interventions could help to enhance student engagement whilst avoiding issues related to staff workload akin to those Balan discussed in earlier sections. The wider responsibilities of academic staff are an important factor in this Chapter’s exploration of academic and vocational *skills*, with the end of the Chapter providing a compelling call for professional development with Balan stressing: ‘ongoing training and support not only benefits the individual law teachers but also enhance the overall learning experience for students’ (p.170).

*Assessment and Problem-Based Learning in the Law Curriculum: The PREPS Framework* serves as a provocation for legal educators. It invites them to consider the role of the law curriculum and how to prepare students for their lives as graduates. Balan’s analysis is centred on a specific type of institution – those comparable with the University of East London – but is attentive to the context of reforms to legal education in England and Wales as a whole. The book is also likely to be of interest to legal educators globally, particularly those seeking to integrate vocational skills with an eye to the legal professions into their teaching at an undergraduate level.

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1. Aspasia I Tsaoussi, ‘Using Soft Skills Courses to Inspire Law Teachers: a new methodology for a more humanistic legal education’ (2020) 54(1) The Law Teacher 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)