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BOOK REVIEW: WHAT IS LEGAL EDUCATION FOR? REASSESSING THE PURPOSES OF EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY LEARNING AND LAW SCHOOLS EDITED BY RACHEL DUNN, PAUL MAHARG, AND VICTORIA ROPER

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In an era of rapid regulatory change, globalisation, and growing calls for social justice, the purpose of legal education is under more scrutiny than ever before. *What is Legal Education for?* edited by Rachel Dunn, Paul Maharg, and Victoria Roper, is a timely and ambitious collection that interrogates the very foundations of legal education in the UK and beyond. This volume brings together leading voices to reflect on the enduring and emerging purposes of law schools, offering a critical extension of Peter Birks' influential 1996 collection, *Pressing Problems in the Law: What is the Law School for?*¹

The book's structure, as revealed in the table of contents, reflects a deliberate progression from foundational questions about the identity and mission of law schools, through the lived experiences of teachers and students, to contemporary challenges such as decolonisation, class, gender, technology, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In Chapter 1, Elaine Hall and Samantha Rasiah open the volume with a direct challenge to the "unitary idea" of the law school, scrutinising the assumptions that have traditionally underpinned legal education in the UK. They argue that the notion of a single, coherent law school purpose is increasingly untenable in the face of jurisdictional diversity, regulatory fragmentation, and the rise of devolved legal systems.² Drawing on historical examples and contemporary policy debates, the authors demonstrate how legal education is shaped by local histories, political economies, and the lived experiences of students and staff.³

This chapter establishes the book's central argument: that legal education must be understood as a contested and evolving field, and that any attempt to define its purpose must grapple with complexity, diversity, and change.⁴

In Chapter 2, Maribel Canto-Lopez explores the evolving role of law teachers in the context of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and

¹ Rachel Dunn, Paul Maharg, and Victoria Roper, eds., *What is Legal Education for?* (Routledge, 2023), Preface xvii.

² Elaine Hall and Samantha Rasiah, "The unitary idea of 'the' law school and other issues when defining 'problems' in legal education," in *What is Legal Education for?* 1–24.

³ Ibid 7–19.

⁴ Ibid 10–12.

the ever-changing higher education sector in England. Canto-Lopez investigates how law teachers' voices can be introduced and valued within the increasingly bureaucratic and metric-driven environment of UK higher education.⁵ The chapter provides a nuanced analysis of the tensions between teaching, research, and administration, highlighting the pressures faced by academics as they navigate shifting expectations and institutional demands.⁶

Canto-Lopez's insights are particularly valuable in light of recent regulatory reforms, such as the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE), which have further complicated the relationship between academic legal education and professional qualification.⁷

In Chapter 3, Chloë Wallace interrogates the meaning of "global" legal education and its implications for the traditional LLB curriculum. Wallace examines how law schools are responding to the pressures of globalisation, international student recruitment, and the demands of transnational legal practice.⁸

She critically assesses the assumption that "global" legal education is inherently progressive or inclusive, arguing instead that it can reinforce existing hierarchies and exclusions.⁹ Wallace calls for a more critical and context-sensitive approach to curriculum design, one that recognises the diversity of legal systems and the importance of local knowledge.¹⁰

One of the most powerful contributions comes from Foluke Ifejola Adebisi and Katie Bales in Chapter 4. The authors offer a searing critique

⁵ Maribel Canto-Lopez, "What are law teachers for? Finding ways to introduce law teachers' voices through the TEF in the ever-changing HE sector in England," in *What is Legal Education for?* 25–59.

⁶ Ibid 30–35.

⁷ Ibid 41–45.

⁸ Chloë Wallace, "Beyond the jurisdiction: law schools, the LLB and 'global' education," in *What is Legal Education for?* 60–84.

⁹ Ibid 68–73.

¹⁰ Ibid 73–81.

of the traditional legal canon, exposing how it often obscures the law's role in producing and maintaining racial and colonial hierarchies.¹¹

Adebisi and Bales argue for a race-conscious, decolonial approach to legal education that challenges the status quo and centres the voices and experiences of marginalised communities.¹² Their chapter is both theoretically rigorous and practically oriented, offering concrete suggestions for diversifying the curriculum and creating more inclusive learning environments.¹³

In Chapter 5, Jessica Guth and Doug Morrison turn the spotlight onto issues of class and gender, asking "Who are law schools for?" Their analysis reveals how social class and gender shape access to, and experiences within, law schools, often in ways that reinforce existing inequalities.¹⁴

Guth and Morrison provide a sobering account of the barriers faced by students from non-traditional backgrounds, including financial constraints, cultural capital, and the hidden curriculum of legal education.¹⁵ They argue that meaningful reform must go beyond surface-level diversity initiatives and address the structural factors that perpetuate exclusion¹⁶.

In Chapter 6, Emma Jones challenges the traditional separation between "academic" and "practical" skills in legal education. Jones argues for a more holistic understanding of legal skills, encompassing not only doctrinal analysis and advocacy but also empathy, collaboration, and ethical judgment.¹⁷

¹¹ Foluke Ifejola Adebisi and Katie Bales, "Reinventing possibility: a reflection on law, race and decolonial discourse in legal education," in *What is Legal Education for?* 85–110.

¹² *Ibid.* 91–96.

¹³ *Ibid.* 97–107.

¹⁴ Jessica Guth and Doug Morrison, "Who are law schools for? A story of class and gender," in *What is Legal Education for?* 111–137.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 116–124.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 124–133.

¹⁷ Emma Jones, "A change in outfit? Conceptualising legal skills in the contemporary law school," in *What is Legal Education for?* 138–166.

Drawing on empirical research and pedagogical theory, Jones demonstrates how skills development can be integrated into the core curriculum, rather than relegated to standalone modules or extracurricular activities.¹⁸ Her chapter offers practical strategies for embedding skills training into everyday teaching and assessment, making a compelling case for the transformative potential of skills-based education.¹⁹

Chapter 7 by Paul Maharg is one of the most intellectually ambitious chapters in the volume. Maharg invites readers to reimagine jurisprudential inquiry as a deeply personal and creative process, one that resists the reduction of law to rules and procedures and instead embraces the complexity and ambiguity of legal meaning.²⁰

He draws on philosophical and literary sources to argue for a more imaginative, reflective, and embodied approach to legal education.²¹ Maharg's chapter is a call to cultivate "originary intimacy" with the law, a sense of connection, curiosity, and wonder that can inspire both teachers and students.²²

Chapter 8, "Three authors in search of phenomenologies of learning and technology", co-authored by Lydia Bleasdale, Paul Maharg, and Craig Newbery-Jones, explores the impact of digital technologies on legal education. The authors examine how online platforms, virtual classrooms, and digital resources are reshaping the ways in which students engage with legal knowledge.²³

They highlight both the opportunities and challenges of digital learning, noting that while technology can enhance access and flexibility, it also raises questions about equity, attention, and the commodification of education.²⁴ The chapter concludes with a call for "technology-critical

¹⁸ Ibid 141-147.

¹⁹ Ibid 147-161.

²⁰ Paul Maharg, "'Originary intimacy': a thought experiment in jurisprudential legal education inquiry," in *What is Legal Education for?* 167-194.

²¹ Ibid 171-179.

²² Ibid 179-191.

²³ Lydia Bleasdale, Paul Maharg and Craig Newbery-Jones, "Three authors in search of phenomenologies of learning and technology," in *What is Legal Education for?* 195-230.

²⁴ Ibid 196-203.

literacies” that enable students and teachers to navigate the digital landscape thoughtfully and ethically.²⁵

Chapter 9 - Margaret Thornton’s closing chapter, “What is the law school for in a post-pandemic world?”, reflects on the profound disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Thornton examines how the rapid shift to online learning, the challenges of maintaining community, and the pressures on staff and students have transformed the law school experience.²⁶

She argues that the pandemic has brought into sharp relief the need for flexibility, empathy, and resilience in legal education, and has accelerated changes that might otherwise have taken years to unfold.²⁷ Thornton’s chapter is both a sobering assessment of the challenges ahead and a hopeful vision for a more humane and adaptive law school.²⁸

The greatest strength of *What is Legal Education For?* is its breadth and depth. By assembling a diverse array of voices ranging from regulatory analysts to decolonial theorists, from empirical researchers to reflective practitioners the editors have curated a volume that is both wide ranging and intellectually cohesive. The book is unafraid to confront difficult questions, including those that challenge the foundational assumptions of the legal academy. Rather than providing a singular vision or prescriptive model, the collection embraces complexity, plurality, and dialogue. This openness enables the volume to speak meaningfully to a range of stakeholders across legal education academics, students, administrators, and policymakers alike.

A particularly distinctive contribution of the book lies in its engagement with wellbeing, decolonisation, and the lived experiences of both students and staff. These themes mark a significant advance over earlier scholarship that has often privileged doctrinal content and professional competencies at the expense of emotional, cultural, and relational dimensions of legal

²⁵ Ibid 221-224.

²⁶ Margaret Thornton, “What is the law school for in a post-pandemic world?” in *What is Legal Education for?* 231-260.

²⁷ Ibid 248-252.

²⁸ Ibid 252-253.

learning. The willingness of contributors to foreground emotion, affect, and social justice reflects a broader pedagogical shift within higher education towards more inclusive and holistic models of learning. Several chapters especially those authored by individuals with lived experience of marginalisation provide critical insights into how law schools can reconfigure themselves as spaces of care, community, and resistance. The inclusion of practical strategies for reform such as embedding wellbeing into the curriculum, fostering reflective practice, and creating dialogic spaces gives the book a pragmatic as well as a theoretical edge.

As with many edited collections, the diversity of perspectives, while a major strength, can at times result in unevenness. While the editors provide a strong thematic through-line and an insightful introduction, some chapters feel more tangential or less integrated into the central argument. The absence of a single, unified thesis may frustrate readers who are seeking concrete recommendations or a step-by-step blueprint for reform. Additionally, the book's primary focus remains the UK context. Though this is understandable given the editors' institutional locations and the regulatory frameworks they engage with, the relatively limited engagement with legal education in other jurisdictions, particularly in the Global South, feels like a missed opportunity. A more sustained comparative analysis that drew upon non-Western legal traditions and alternative pedagogical models would have further enriched the discussion and extended its relevance beyond the UK.

Nevertheless, *What is Legal Education For?* offers a series of challenges and opportunities for law schools, educators, and policymakers. The contributors collectively argue for a reimagining of legal education that is:

- **Context-sensitive:** recognising the diversity of legal systems, student populations, and societal needs;
- **Inclusive:** addressing issues of race, class, gender, and wellbeing as central, not peripheral, concerns;
- **Critical and reflective:** creating spaces for slow, thoughtful reform rather than reactive, piecemeal change;

- **Innovative:** embracing new pedagogies, technologies, and curricular models that prepare students for the complexities of contemporary legal practice.

The book's call to action is clear: law schools must move beyond narrow, utilitarian conceptions of their purpose and instead embrace their role as sites of critical inquiry, civic engagement, and personal transformation.

In sum, *What is Legal Education For?* is an essential and timely contribution to the literature on legal education reform. It revisits foundational questions with fresh eyes, incorporating the lessons of the past three decades while insisting on the need for ongoing reflection and innovation. The volume's multidimensional engagement with wellbeing, decolonisation, and the affective experience of legal learning marks it out as a landmark work one that will shape debates about the future of law schools for years to come. For anyone concerned with the future of legal education whether as an educator, student, practitioner, or policymaker this book is required reading. It does not offer easy answers, but it provides the conceptual tools and critical frameworks needed to ask the right questions and imagine transformative alternatives.