

Reflections of an Australian Academic on Externship in Thailand

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Meeting the ‘dynamic duo’ of Bruce and Wendy in Brisbane last year inspired me to get organised and visit our QUT interns whilst they were on their three-week placement in Chiang Mai in January 2012.

BABSEA CLE has been a placement partner for Queensland University of Technology law students enrolled in work-integrated learning (WIL) units since 2007. I became involved in teaching in our WIL program in 2011 with the ‘bribe’ of a possible free trip to Thailand. The bribe worked, and my experiences working with BABSEA CLE since then have reinvigorated my enthusiasm for teaching and working with law students, as well as reaffirming the value of legal skills and knowledge in promoting social justice.

My colleague Tina Cockburn and I arrived in Chiang Mai from Brisbane and were immediately whisked up to Phayao University, ‘only’ three hours away in northern Thailand.

Any feelings of tiredness were forgotten as we were warmly greeted by our students and Wendy and then joined the Thai students and Ajaan Withoon for dinner. The rapport between the BABSEA CLE interns and the Thai law students was immediately obvious, and highlighted again the following day watching our students teaching workshops and engaging with their Thai colleagues. We were impressed by the preparation and team - work shown by all the interns, as well as their genuine interest and enthusiasm for the work they were doing. Observing our students in action gave meaning and depth to our understanding of the BABSEA CLE program

and the work our students are engaged in. It was also valuable to experience the conditions they are exposed to – hard bunk beds, cold water and squat toilets!

Our few days back in Chiang Mai gave us time to discuss our students’ progress with Bruce and Wendy and the team. Trust in the integrity and professional-ism of an overseas placement partner in supervising students is essential, and we were able to observe the professionalism and dedication of the entire BABSEA CLE team. We also forged great friendships and enjoyed lots of laughs – it’s an





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Australia Day I won't forget! We attended meetings organised with BABSEA CLE partners and were involved in discussions on topics ranging from teaching ethical issues to human trafficking and statelessness issues in Thailand. Our interns were involved in researching these and other legal issues, as well as being immersed in experiences with the local community. For Tina and I, this included an evening visit to the Saturday night markets and the lady boys' free Cabaret Show. The humour, friendliness and over-the-top costumes of the performers masks the abuse and hardships they suffer. BABSEA CLE's work in assisting the transgender community made a deep impression on us after meeting the performers and talking to them.

For the five days we were in Chiang Mai we saw our students passionately working on BABSEA CLE projects at all hours of the day and night. They were cheerful, tired, enthusiastic, and immensely grateful for the opportunity to come to Thailand and work with BABSEA CLE. The reflections the students submitted (as part of their assessment to gain academic

credit for their internship) reveal the true value of their experience. They described and reflected on the value of Community Legal Education from their personal experiences, and indicated how they believe their BABSEA CLE experiences will impact on their future legal careers. As one student put it, "The value of community legal education isn't just limited to the vulnerable sector. It benefits law students, the academic sector and the wider community, as it creates sustainability and therefore empowers a community." And another commented, "Experiencing that [BABSEA CLE] work first hand, really highlighted the importance of

promoting CLE programs throughout my own career." Internships such as this offer a unique opportunity to inspire and motivate the next generation of lawyers to promote social justice and access to justice. The value of empowering Thai people through community legal education was clear. Our commitment to fostering a strong sense of social justice and responsibility in our QUT law graduates was strengthened by our short visit to BABSEA CLE in Thailand. The experiences are real and life-changing – for both students and academics!

