Face the challenges head on

A unique program delivers practical experience for law students wanting careers in human rights and development, writes Clive Hopkins.

‘D’evelopment is an increasing area of practice for lawyers, with NGOs [non-governmental organisations], the UN, or bodies like the World Bank,” a professor of international law at Sydney University, Ben Saul, says. “But when it’s taught in Australia, it’s usually done in an abstract and theoretical way.”

As an antidote to this approach, the Sydney Centre for International Law has established the Himalayan Field School, enabling Australian law students to spend 2½ weeks in Nepal, observing challenges of development and human rights firsthand.

“It’s a new model, where we combine traditional learning, through reading and lectures, with exposure to how the law actually plays out,” Saul says.

Those attending the field school can obtain credits for undergraduate and postgraduate law courses and the scheme is open to students from any Australian university. The scheme also involves Australian and Nepalese law students working together, and the hope is that this will have a long-term benefit of strengthening legal education at the Kathmandu School of Law.

Alison Ewart is studying for a master's degree in international law at the University of NSW and attended the Himalayan Field School last year.

“One of the highlights was a visit to Melamchi, a rural village three hours outside of Katmandu,” Ewart says. “With the help of our counterpart Nepalese students, we were able to engage with the locals in candid discussions about the challenges of making a living in the context of a developing country.”

Ewart and her colleagues also undertook site visits to government offices, NGOs and to offices of the UN, where they learnt about the realities of working in this field from those already doing the job.

“An experience like this can definitely inspire you to pursue a career in human rights,” Ewart says. “Regardless of whether you do, the field school gives you a good insight into the social, economic and environmental problems existing globally. Such knowledge is increasingly important, no matter what your field of work.”

Course evaluation responses reveal almost all students who attended in its first two years are interested in pursuing a career in development or human rights.

“It can be a fairly confronting experience [for the students],” Saul says. “But it opens up whole new horizons for them, both professional and personally.

“It’s unique and worldwide, as far as we can tell. We’ve taken the ‘foreign immersion’ experience a step further.”

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Top of the class ... students from the Himalayan Field School get to experience their career options firsthand.