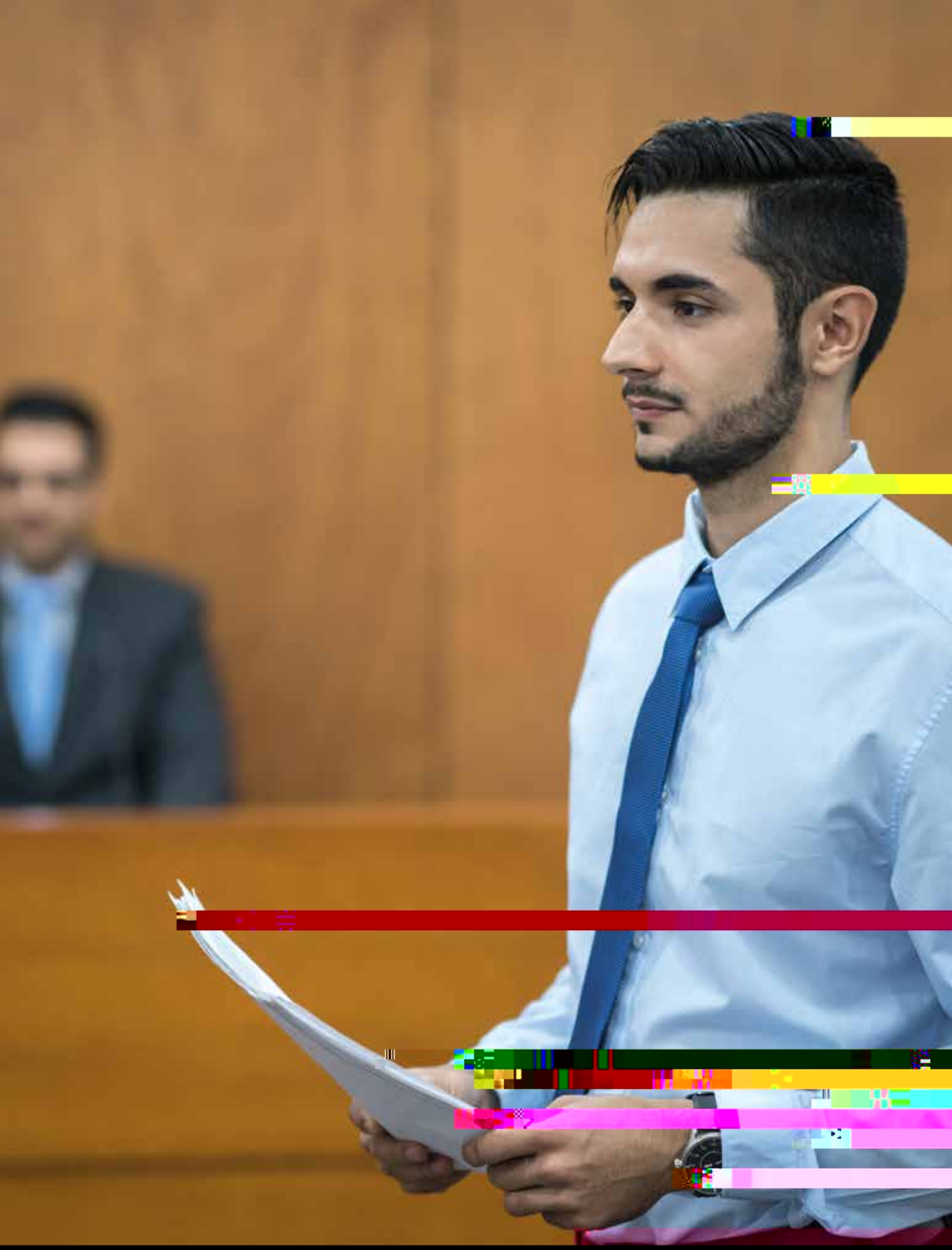
UCL CENTRE FOR ACCESS TO JUSTICE

A guide to

Public Interest Law

Foreword

The context of public interest lawyering in the UK has changed considerably over time yet has a deeply embedded history. Across the country there has long been a tradition



What is Legal Aid?

Legal aid is government-funded legal support for people who are unable to pay for legal advice or representation. It comprises criminal legal aid for criminal cases and civil legal aid for non-criminal cases.

What do we mean by Public Inte mean by

Pro Bono

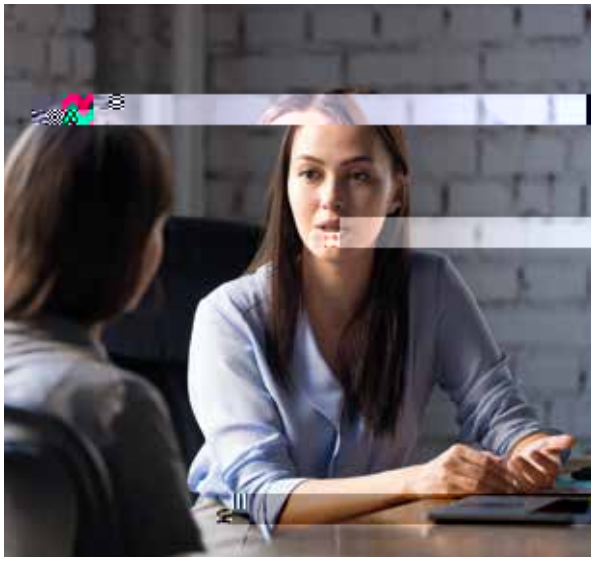
What is Pro Bono?

Pro bono is short for the Latin term “pro bono publico”, meaning “for the public good.”

Why do Pro Bono?

in which to put into practice skills acquired at University in a real-world context. Working within a group can strengthen your team-working skills. Getting involved in the organisation and coordination of projects can also give you great opportunities

Depending on the nature of the project, you might also develop other skills. For example, working directly with clients allows you to develop your client care and management experience, which can help you develop greater confidence. When you reach an advanced stage in your volunteering you may wish to move into representing clients at Tribunals with charities such as the FRU (the Free Representation Unit), which can provide an excellent means of developing your negotiation, drafting, advocacy and public speaking skills.



Doing pro bono work is also an important means of demonstrating your commitment to social justice and public interest issues when applying for pupillage, training contracts, or other positions in the charity sector.

Fundamentally, getting involved in pro bono can offer you the opportunity to apply the skills you are acquiring through your university studies in support of individuals who can benefit from your assistance.

"Pro bono is a hugely important part of being a law student, and I knew I wanted to be involved with different projects from my first year. I have learned so much through the different kinds of pro bono work I've been involved in, relevant both to law and our wider society – I would definitely recommend it to anyone who is interested."
Natalia Ventikos, UCL Laws LLB student 2016–19

Areas of Practice

Application Advice

Social Welfare Law

Social welfare law refers collectively to large areas of civil (i.e. non-criminal) law in which

Most definitions encompass working in areas of law such as debt advice, discrimination, mental health, welfare benefts, employment, education, community care and housing. This section explores what working in welfare benefts involves in particular.

What does a typical day look like for a social welfare lawyer working in welfare benefts?
Most welfare benefts lawyers will fnd themselves helping individuals with mental and physical health conditions apply for benefts, ensuring they're getting the correct amount, and challenging negative decisions at court.

Lawyers will need to have strong interpersonal skills to work with vulnerable clients and professionals such as doctors, social workers and others who may be also involved in their client's life.

How to get started

Notwithstanding cuts to legal aid, a number of organisations continue to support individuals to access the benefts to which they are entitled, without which they would face destitution.

For opportunities to get started and acquire volunteer pro bono experience it's worth researching the following organisations in particular as a starting point:

- The Free Representation Unit (also known as the FRU);
- The Law Centres Network
- Citizens Advice Bureaux

"My advice would be to undertake as much work experience as possible so that you have a better understanding of the diferent roles available and so that you can get an idea of what area of specialism and what type of a frm would be the best 'ft' for you. Some frms will ofer permanent roles to work experience staf if they do well so work experience can also open up further opportunities as well as providing experience. I would also suggest relevant volunteer work, which does not have to be directly related to law, or shadowing an advisor at a law advice centre as a way of gaining further experience. Finally, I would say that if this kind of career is something that interests you, don't give up! It's a career that is wonderfully challenging, interesting, varied and rewarding."

Housing Law

Housing law encompasses a broad range of landlord and tenant disputes, and clients can include private individuals, such as tenants or local authorities, landlords or housing associations.

What does a typical day look like for a Housing Lawyer?

Clients can be especially distressed, angry or frightened if possession proceedings are imminent (which can lead to an individual losing their house and becoming homeless). Determination, a non-judgmental attitude, interpersonal skills and negotiation and advocacy are crucial to success in this feld – being able to negotiate on behalf of a client who is facing possession proceedings can mean the difference between their being evicted from their home and onto the streets, or being allowed to continue to reside at the property.

Lawyers often act on a range of issues including homelessness matters, property disrepair, eviction, or allegations of harassment.

Routes into the profession

Firms with a large social housing practice (primarily acting for Tenants) include:

- Anthony Gold
- Hodge, Jones & Allen
- Edwards Duthie

Chambers with expertise in social housing include:

- Cornerstone Barristers
- Doughty Street Chambers
- 4 – 5 Gray's Inn Square
- Five Paper
- Garden Court Chambers

There are many charities that focus on housing and homelessness including:

- Shelter
- Crisis
- Housing Justice

"… you make such a tangible difference to people's lives – there is no other area like it. There are not many jobs where you can, with the power of the law, get someone housed when they have been on the street or keep someone's home when five minutes before they were terrified they would lose it."
Vicky Fewkes, Solicitor, Ealing Law Centre

Education Law

The main cases which education lawyers often focus on can include acting on behalf of parents of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in negligence cases where children have not been provided with the services or education they should have received at school or elsewhere, as well as cases involving admissions and school exclusions.

Ensuring access to education and appropriate services for children, especially in SEN, can be crucial to ensure a child has the best start in life.

What does a typical day look like for an Education Lawyer?

Most cases will turn on established public law principles. A solid grasp of these is vital to ensure success. Parents can be very concerned or distressed if they fnd their child is being mistreated or not receiving the proper services to which they are entitled. Excellent interpersonal skills are therefore crucial to work efectively with clients and gain their trust.

Routes into the profession

Firms with practice areas including Education Law include:

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Immigration & Asylum

lead to dramatic changes in the legal landscape. Given the varied and international client base strong interpersonal skills and an interest in local and international politics are helpful for pursuing a career in these areas of law.

Criminal Law

The range of work undertaken varies considerably depending on the nature of the work (prosecution or defence) and the type of crimes defended or prosecuted, including

but a few.

Changes to legal aid mean that frms and chambers which once specialised in general crime are now diversifying their criminal expertise to encompass niche areas such as regulatory work, licencing and professional discipline.

Family Law

Family lawyers are present throughout a person's life – through marriage, divorce and all matters involving children.

There is a general divide between high street frms which complete large case-loads of legal aid fles, and niche frms specialising in matrimonial divorce and working with high-net worth individuals.

What does a typical day look like for a Lawyer working in Family Law?
Child law lawyers will often represent parties in care proceedings. These proceedings begin where a local authority's children services department asks a court to review a child's situation and decide whether it is necessary to put a legal order in place to keep them safe.

Lawyers working in divorce often are involved in taking instructions from clients, negotiating settlements and child contact arrangements, and in mediation outside of court, or providing advocacy on behalf of their client in court.

To succeed you need excellent communication skills – resilience to work with individuals who may be under considerable stress, angry, frightened or upset is also crucial, especially in cases involving abuse or children.

Routes into the profession

Firms with practice areas in family law include:

- Bindmans LLP
- Stephensons Solicitors
- Anthony Gold

Chambers with expertise across family law include:

- Coram Chambers
- 1 Garden Court
- New Court Chambers

"I found it extremely di f cult securing my frst legal job and entering the legal aid sector... I persevered, however, because of a passion for helping people who have been mistreated by the state… My advice is simply: get varied experience, seek advice from people who work in the legal aid sector, and stay committed and focused on your goal." **Sioned Morgan, Paralegal, Hodge, Jones & Allen**

Human Rights & Civil Liberties

Application Advice

How do I fnd out whether an area of practice is for me?
When determining where you wish to apply it's important to let your decisions be guided by your interests and experiences. If you are completely unsure of what areas of law interest you a good starting point is to begin by reading the legal and non-legal press and making a note of the stories that interest you. Refecting on why these issues interest you can provide a good starting point for narrowing down your search.

Online research can provide a quick means of learning more about an area of law, and numerous external resources are provided on the following page. However, there is no better way of fnding out whether an area of law is for you than to acquire frst-hand experience, through mini-pupillages, work placements, working or volunteering part-time during your studies. Most law frms and chambers will advertise whether they ofer these sorts of placements on their websites. If they are not advertising, do not be afraid of emailing an organisation asking if they would be willing to allow you to shadow an individual working there for a few days, attaching a copy of your CV and covering letter outlining your motivation and experience.

What should I consider when choosing which sets of Chambers or Solicitors Firms to apply to?
Beyond the nature of the work conducted by the frm or set of chambers it's also important to make sure your lifestyle and personality are a good ft. A good starting point is to look at their website and social media to fnd out a bit more about the organisation and what other people are saying about them.

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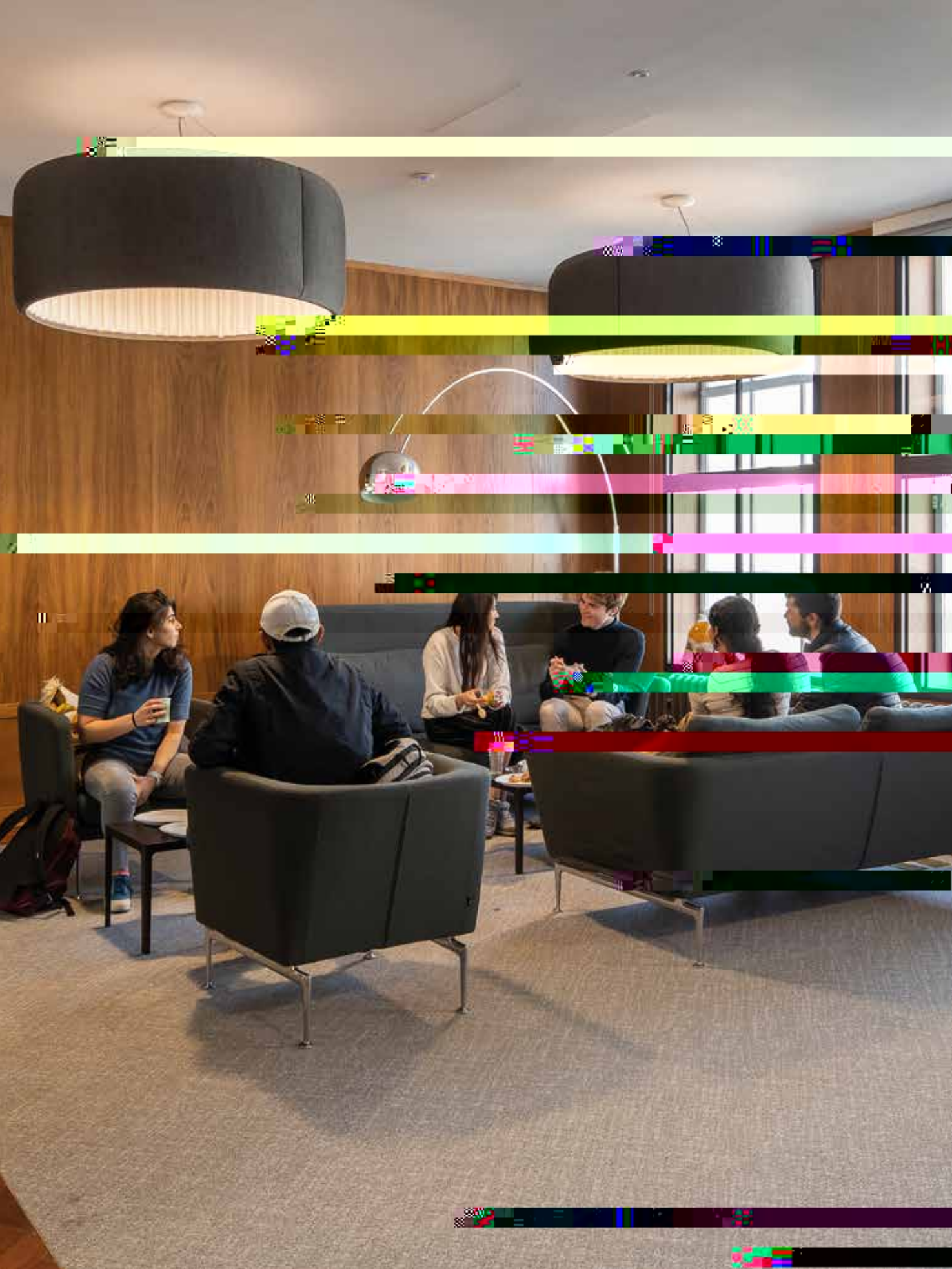
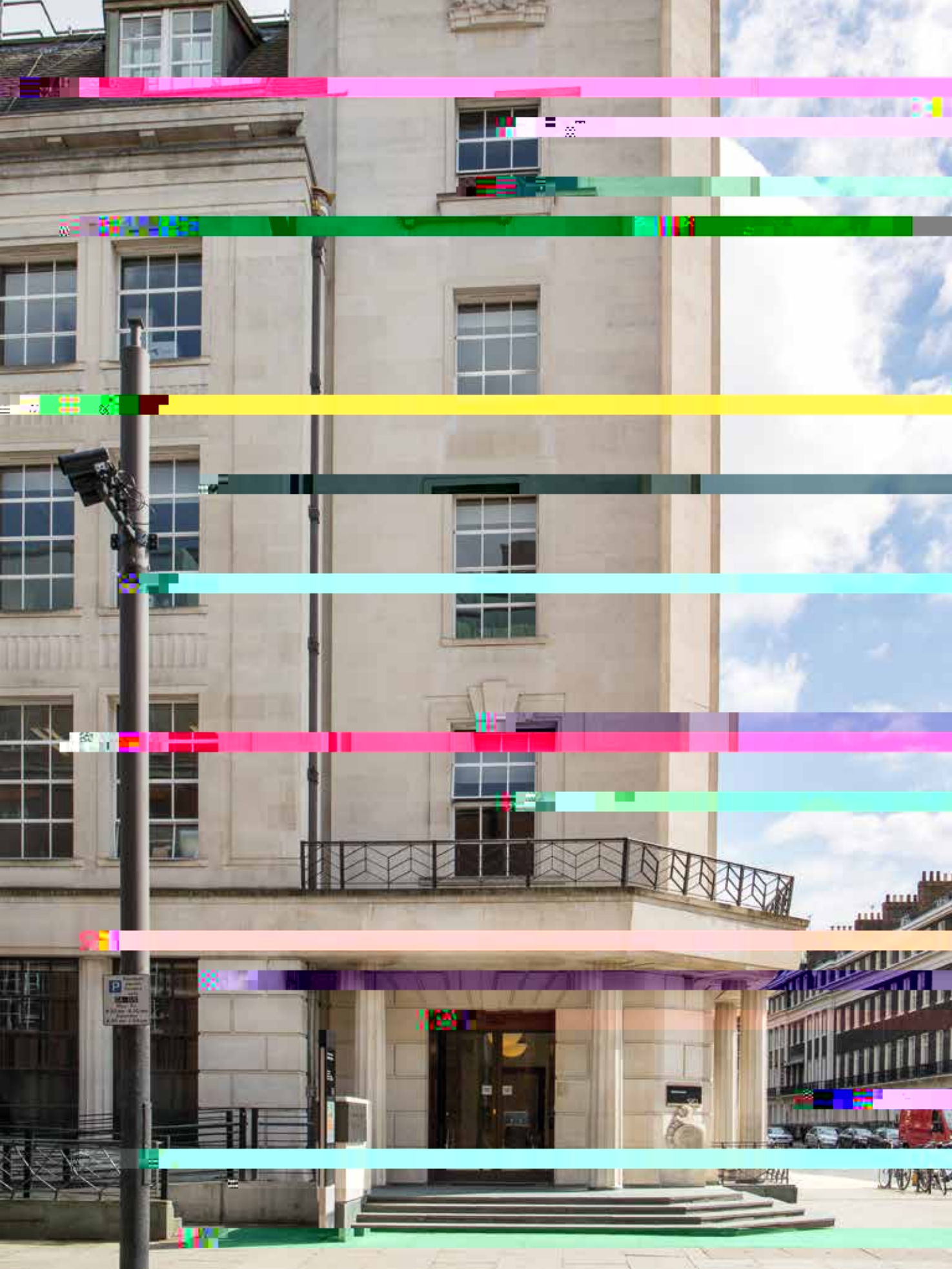


Helpful links

Links for researching practice areas