

Reflections on a Dalhousie Graduate Education



*Fiona McDonald
(JSD(c) Dalhousie Law School)
Lecturer, School of Law, Queensland
University of Technology*

I began my first academic position in mid-2007 as an Associate Lecturer in the School of Law at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and, after achieving tenure, I was promoted to Lecturer at QUT. Beginning my career as an academic was a big step but one for which I was well prepared by my graduate studies in the masters and doctoral programs at the Law School at Dalhousie University and through completing the Certificate in University Learning and Teaching.

One of the most inspiring things from my time at Dalhousie was the collegial and collaborative atmosphere I encountered during my program. I saw faculty and students, often from different disciplines, working together to create new understandings and new knowledge. I saw the excitement, the frustrations, the challenges, and ultimately the rewards of collaboration. As a result, I have taken every opportunity to collaborate with others from within my discipline, from other disciplines, and from other countries both in research and in teaching. One of my current

projects involves working with researchers from Australia and Indonesia examining how district governments in Indonesia make policies to address malnutrition. My colleagues are from different disciplinary backgrounds, namely: health informatics, sociology, food technology, nutrition, and health policy. It has been a wonderful experience and one from which I have learnt so much.

I also was very impressed and inspired by faculty members' scholarly approach to both their research and their teaching. Research was conducted with rigour and integrity and made a real contribution to knowledge and to the public good. Research was designed not just to generate knowledge but to maximize the opportunities for making real legal, political, social, or cultural change. Once the research project was completed there was a great emphasis on communicating research results to the public or to stakeholders, not just through academic channels to fellow academics. The social conscience displayed by members of faculty was remarkable. Most gave very generously of their time and expertise to professional, academic, or community bodies because they genuinely believed that they had a professional responsibility to the community to provide service.

The rigour and integrity of the process was seen also in teaching. I observed faculty giving much thought to how to equip students with the skills necessary for successful professional practice, for their contribution to their profession, and ultimately their contribution to the public good. This thought was in turn reflected in how the courses were designed,

assessed, and delivered—and courses were never static, always evolving in response to student feedback, discussions with peers, and changes in content or social concerns. This was also emphasized in the Certificate program. The awareness I developed about teaching as a graduate student at Dalhousie has allowed me to identify a teaching challenge I face in my current position. Working with colleagues from the Law School and the Faculty of Education at QUT, we have developed a research project to explore best practices in teaching to multi-disciplinary cohorts in our courses.

Last, the mentorship and support I received and am still receiving from my supervisors and from other members of the Faculty was, and is, so important. My supervisors and other faculty members made sure I was offered opportunities outside my program to become involved in research, to give guest lectures in their classes, and for community service. Their doors were always open for advice about my studies, but also about other important matters for a would-be academic—how to write grant applications, manage grants, write journal articles, where to publish, how to write a job application and undertake job interviews, teaching strategies, time management, and so much more.

My time at Dalhousie was invaluable for equipping me with the tools to be a competent teacher and researcher and I am indebted to all who helped me along the journey. Seek out and offer opportunities and take them, always keep learning and maintain your integrity—that is what my time at Dalhousie taught me.