

Title: School Tasking: How legal outreach can benefit pupils, students, and universities alike

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Introduction: School Tasking is a university-led primary outreach project based on the television show, Taskmaster. It began at Warwick Law School (WLS) in 2021 when Ali, as Director of Widening Participation (WP), was looking for ways to make outreach work more engaging. As a Taskmaster fan, she knew that its joyful, gently competitive format could inject fun and interactivity into primary school outreach. In Taskmaster itself, five comedians are pitted against each other in nonsensical tasks to win points from the Taskmaster, Greg Davies,<sup>1</sup>. Taking the elements of, to borrow the words of the show's creator, Alex Horne, 'competing against each other in a supportive way doing ridiculous things for no good reason', School Tasking was born.

Pull Out Quote 1: When I tell people that I volunteer with WLS at a primary school, they are often confused; do we teach degree-level law to Year 5s? And when I explain that the project is based on Taskmaster, they are sometimes surprised - 'isn't that a late-night comedy show?' But the project's combination of law and Taskmaster is its greatest strength.

2: We quickly learned that rather than wanting answers, the children were keen to discuss their ideas with us. Could a duty of care be emotional? What if the law does what I don't want it to do?

3: Initiatives like School Tasking are not only beneficial to the institutions involved from the perspective of taking Law Schools into the community through student-led outreach work, but also benefit the students themselves and the children with whom they are working.

4: School Tasking is, at its heart, designed to spread joy and hope in communities that, one might argue, could well do with a bigger injection of it. It provides gentle exposure to the idea of university and enables pupils to shine, whatever their abilities and predilections (drawing, sculpting, speaking, planning, negotiating).

Article Begins:

### **1. Introduction**

In the first year, the in-school sessions were piloted by a small staff team from WLS, but since then they have been led by teams of Law students. In the 2022-23 academic year, both WLS and Edinburgh Law School (ELS), with Lindsay leading the Edinburgh pilot, ran the project with a student-led teaching team. Over four sessions – covering Introduction to Law, Statutory Interpretation, Tort/Delict, and Human Rights – the student teams teach classes of Year 5 or Primary 6 teams (aged 9-10) from less-

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<sup>1</sup> For those unfamiliar with the show, you can get a taste of the tasks at the Taskmaster YouTube page: [www.youtube.com/@Taskmaster/videos](https://www.youtube.com/@Taskmaster/videos).

advantaged schools about the most interesting, curious, and contentious aspects of law.<sup>2</sup> The pupils then complete a task based on their learning, which is judged by the project Taskmasters.<sup>3</sup>

School Tasking runs as a competition, with participating teams competing against their classmates, other schools in each university competition and, as the project has expanded, all participating schools across the UK and Ireland. In 2023-24, School Tasking is running at 20 universities across six competition 'regions',<sup>4</sup> with each region's winners competing in the 'Champion of Champions' final at Warwick University. As the project has grown, more children are being introduced not just to the study of law, but to the notion of university education more broadly.

A 2023 article focused on the data from the WLS pilot, specifically tracking whether School Tasking may be disrupting children's preconceptions of law (Struthers and McConnell, 2023). In this article, however, we instead focus on the benefits to Law students, to participating universities, and to the pupils themselves of engagement with the project. In the next section, two School Tasking student team members, Ella and Nidhi, offer insights into how their participation has been beneficial, and in Section 3, project leads Ali and Lindsay discuss the likely benefits to universities and participating WP schools of Law students engagement with the project. Concluding remarks are offered in Section 4.

## **2. Benefits to University Students**

In this section, two undergraduate Law students, Ella and Nidhi, offer insights into how the project has benefited them, as well as the pupils they teach. Ella and Nidhi are both second years at WLS and ELS, respectively.

### ***2.1. Ella's Experience***

This is my second year as a School Tasking volunteer, with most of the 2022-23 student team returning; the high level of retention speaking to the positive impact this project has had on us. When I tell people that I volunteer with WLS at a primary school, they are often confused; do we teach degree-level law to Year 5s? And when I explain that the project is based on Taskmaster, they are sometimes surprised - 'isn't that a late-night comedy show?' But the project's combination of law and Taskmaster is its greatest strength. It is not focused on university students expounding lengthy and complex legal topics

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<sup>2</sup> Eligibility for the project at WLS is based on a school having either a higher-than-average percentage of pupils on Free School Meals, or lower-than-average school progress scores.

<sup>3</sup> At WLS, these Taskmasters are Year 5 pupils attending an extra-curricular School Tasking Club at Sidlesham Primary School in West Sussex; and at ELS, the Taskmasters comprised a small staff team.

<sup>4</sup> Twelve additional universities are preparing to launch the project from summer 2024.

(which would not be very interesting for the pupils, or us...) but instead, the Year 5 teams are encouraged to work together, be curious, and ask questions.

I enjoy individually discussing the concepts with pupils, especially those who seem quieter or less confident. It's a great way to check whether I have explained a concept clearly, encouraged group discussion of the task, and to ask (and be asked) challenging questions. A particularly valuable part of School Tasking as a WP project is encouraging pupils who may not be as outspoken or academically confident to speak up, gain self-belief, and work as part of their team. It is inspiring for me to see that by the end of the project, pupils who were hesitant to speak up at the start then volunteer to tell the whole class about the task.

Through the project, I have learnt what works (and what doesn't) in running engaging, informative, and fun sessions. I perhaps expected to improve my public speaking, confidence, communication, and team-work skills, but there have been some unexpected benefits. Firstly, it has increased my own legal understanding and curiosity, particularly when the pupils make interesting and inventive arguments about law. And secondly, it is a genuinely exciting opportunity to be part of. Watching it grow, from a handful of Warwickshire schools to a national rollout, has been empowering. I hope we are making a difference for the pupils involved; whether inspiring them to study at university, encouraging their self-confidence, or simply providing them with a few fun, extracurricular sessions to take their mind off school or home life.

## ***2.2 Nidhi's Experience***

Participating in School Tasking at ELS was truly the most unique experience. I realised how much I enjoy working with children, bolstering my career aspirations of going into family law. The skills I learned – from how to attract the attention of a class to phrasing things simply – have helped me in the various children's welfare-related jobs since.

When conducting sessions, it became increasingly apparent which children thought themselves to be academically inclined and which did not. I realised that my role was to encourage each child to use their individuality to contribute to the tasks. We quickly learned that rather than wanting answers, the children were keen to discuss their ideas with us. Could a duty of care be emotional? What if the law does what I don't want it to do? As a Law student, it is easy to get overwhelmed with case law and wonder about whether I know a topic inside out; such interactions with the children reminded me that much of law is about having ideas about how the law would help people in an ideal world.

Organisational skills were also a big part of School Tasking. From going over the materials, to divvying up the session teaching, it was a four-week process of learning. I learned that my strength lies in focused small group interactions with teams of children. I plan to apply to be a Student Ambassador this academic year and feel that School Tasking has definitely made me a more well-rounded person.

I feel hopeful about returning to School Tasking this year. At the end of the fourth session, the children complete a feedback form. One question asked: 'do you think you can go to university?' I remember one of the quieter children slowly and deliberately tick the 'yes' box; she hadn't interacted much during the sessions but, knowing that most children at that school do not consider higher education, the fact that she thought about university at all felt like an achievement for the project. School Tasking is not about teaching the children law – it is about showing them that university life in general is for them, in whatever field their individuality might lie.

### **3. Benefits to the Universities and Participating Schools**

In 2022-23 and 2023-24, Ali recruited 24 Law students to run the in-school sessions in teams of 2-3. The students were provided with the project materials and worked in their teams to prepare and deliver the teaching.<sup>5</sup> Some aspects of the sessions – including the tasks to be judged – had to remain consistent across participating classes, but there was flexibility around how the students would organise and run the activities. The students all stepped up to their responsibilities: they were punctual, well-prepared, and reliable throughout, representing the university with professionalism.

At ELS, Lindsay leads the school's WP work with almost twenty years' experience in the field. In 2022-23 Edinburgh ran the first full Scottish roll-out of School Tasking, having been involved since its inception. Fifteen student volunteers applied and were selected based on previous experience, and enthusiasm. They worked in teams of 2-3 to deliver the same project materials as WLS, but with any necessary Scottish 'tweaks' having been made by Lindsay. ELS selected four primary schools that had been involved with the University of Edinburgh's Primary and Early Secondary Years initiative,<sup>6</sup> with these primaries feeding into secondary schools with the lowest progression onto university. 2023-24 saw Edinburgh work again with schools from this grouping and another team of fifteen students.

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<sup>5</sup> The project materials were themselves co-created with a small Law student team at Warwick in 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Now running for twenty years.

At a fundamental level, recruiting students to assist with Widening Participation outreach increases the capacity of a university to work with more classes across a greater number of eligible local schools. Students are also able to provide feedback on how activities are received by classes, and make recommendations for improvements. But student-led outreach can have wider benefits to the participating pupils, to the students involved, and to the university. When evaluating the success of outreach projects, data is important; indeed, the 2023 article mentioned above focuses on the School Tasking data. But personal narratives and testimonials can be equally, if not more, compelling when considering the impact of student-led teaching (Jack & Struthers, 2023). Indeed, Year 5 teachers of the participating classes at WLS have observed of the student teams that:

*They grew in confidence each week that they were in front of the class. They built up a good rapport with the children in the class, who looked forward to seeing them each week.*

*The students represented the university well and provided good role models for our children. Some said that they were first in their families to go to university, which really resonated with some of the children.*

*They were professional throughout and able to explain quite difficult concepts in a simple way to our Year 5s. The sessions were engaging and fun and the students brought a lovely energy.*

If team members make it known that they are first generation students, Ali suggests that this is something that they may like to mention during the sessions and, clearly, this has been observed and appreciated by some class teachers. This is not to say that these are the only students who can deliver these sessions with integrity, and it is important that pupils understand that part of going to university is meeting people like them and people different to them. Certainly, a key reason for shifting from staff-led to student-led teaching was the likelihood that students offer more relatable role-models. Not only are they more similar in age to the children, but at WLS they are appointed on the basis of approachability, suitability for a teaching role, perceived reliability, and their interest in WP. At ELS, the students' training session emphasises the importance of working with the selected schools, and shares data and narrative on the reality that faces many of the pupils and their communities, along with insights into how this translates to ensuring they run their sessions without assumption, and with care and inclusion built in.

Opportunities for university students to engage in outreach work confer benefits upon the students themselves, in particular transferable skills, such as 'communication, oral presentation and IT, but also more abstract skills like flexibility, confidence and time-management, ability to work as a member of a team and under pressure' that are highly valued in a competitive job market (Ylonen, 2012, p.803). Such engagement also confers benefits upon universities. As evidenced by the feedback above, our students are essentially adopting the role of ambassadors and, when they take a professional approach to their commitment, this reflects well on their institutions. There are also links between student involvement in delivering outreach programmes and their perception of their own belonging, which clearly benefits both student and institution. As Green puts it:

... the surveyed ambassadors held very positive views about the role's value and these views relate to factors which researchers have identified as influencing retention and success. The ambassadors believed that their sense of belonging, fulfilment, interest and enthusiasm for university and academic self-efficacy had been enhanced by the role. (2018; p.33)

At ELS, students have spoken about the ways in which the project has refreshed their passion for studying law and being at university. Many have expressed an interest in becoming more involved in work of this type. Some have also spoken of not knowing that Edinburgh 'did' this kind of work, reflecting that it has further renewed their pride to be part of the institution.

Students can also represent a positive and impartial role model for pupils (Aimhigher, 2010; p.38), demonstrating the benefits of university study but not in a way that overtly promotes particular institutions (in contrast to, for example, university open days, where students would be engaging in more direct marketing activities). Sanders and Higham have observed that the clearest evidence of impact regarding student involvement in WP initiatives relates to 'intensive activities based upon a sustained relationship between student and learner' (2021; p.19), and suggest that students can provide a valuable source of information for pupils who do not have a family background in higher education. The participating pupils had the benefit of receiving an engaging introduction to law from a cohort of students who are at the beginning of their legal journeys. The students approach the sessions with an energy and enthusiasm that may inspire pupils to consider university study as an option for them. Our data indicates that the project is disrupting children's preconceptions of what law is and who it is for (Struthers and McConnell, 2023), but it also, perhaps more importantly, reveals that nearly all of the pupils involved fundamentally enjoy taking part in School Tasking. If this is all that the project achieves, then it remains a worthwhile endeavour. But our data shows that it is likely to be

doing considerably more than this: both in challenging children's preconceptions of law and in introducing them to the notion of university study as something that can be for them.

#### **4. Concluding Remarks**

Initiatives like School Tasking are not only beneficial to the institutions involved from the perspective of taking Law Schools into the community through student-led outreach work, but also benefit the students themselves and the children with whom they are working. School Tasking does not have an overt WP agenda that could inadvertently alienate pupils in the classroom who do not want to go to university; in other words, it does not reinforce the dangerous 'dichotomy between 'achievement' and 'success' and non-participation and 'failure'' (Taylor, 2008; pp.161-162). Instead, it is designed to be genuinely enjoyable for children, through gentle competition and engagement with the most interesting, curious, and contentious aspects of law.

School Tasking is, at its heart, designed to spread joy and hope in communities that, one might argue, could well do with a bigger injection of it. It provides gentle exposure to the idea of university and enables pupils to shine, whatever their abilities and predilections (drawing, sculpting, speaking, planning, negotiating). The winning group in one competition summed it up well when their teacher shared that they were 'just extremely happy and shocked they could win something, so it was joyful to witness on their return to school'. Readers should note the subtle difference in being shocked they *could* win something rather than that they *had*. That is meaningful outreach; that is School Tasking.

*If you'd like to find out more about getting involved in School Tasking, either as a Law School running the project or an eligible primary school participating, please visit our website: <https://taskmastereducation.com/school-tasking>*

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