Doing Law Beyond the State: Research Methodologies in Comparative, EU and Public and Private International Law

Project Background and Overview

In 2008, Sheffield hosted an AHRC-funded workshop on research methodologies for PhD Students and Early Career Researchers in EU and (Public) International Law. Delegates attended from several countries and a book was published as a result:


In many ways that project proceeded from the pragmatic assumption that there was something unique to research methodologies in EU law and international law, and drew on existing approaches within those fields to present an introductory text to highlight not only the importance of methodological enquiry to legal research, but particular ways in which method can be pursued within our respective areas of study.

Compelled both by positive feedback from the previous project and from overlapping interests in theoretical and methodological issues amongst members of Sheffield’s Centre for International and European Law (SCIEL), the current research project seeks to take the previous research a stage further. We have expanded our scope of interest to include both comparative law and private international law.

We seek to ask some more fundamental questions about what unites these fields, and what is unique about each of them. We are convinced that there is something that unites these legal movements. We have at least three more pressing, contemporary reasons for framing the project in the way that we do.

- It seems to us that questions of method are particularly important in the context of legal studies beyond the state (broadly defined), where the very foundations, purpose and nature of particular legal orders, or particular sub-disciplines of academic study, are contested in a way which one rarely sees in domestic law.
- In public international law and EU law in particular, in light of critical approaches which have called into question the coherence of the object of our studies, the need to take a position on what it is that we “do” as legal academics is becoming ever more critical.
- With the growing expansion of legal orders beyond the state and the increasing normative interaction and conflict occurring between them, practitioners, judges and legal academics from each face questions for which there may be no definite right answer, but which require one to think about the nature of the legal orders in question and the need to think comparatively about legal method.

Developing an understanding of these issues will benefit immensely from interactions between scholars working within the areas of comparative, EU and international law (in both its public and private guise). We believe that bringing scholars together to ask challenging questions about the nature of their scholarly enterprises will facilitate self-understanding more than if these issues were considered in isolation.

We have been successful in obtaining some initial funding (from the School of Law and Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Sheffield, and the University Association of Contemporary European Studies), to hold a scoping workshop with the aim of bringing together both established research leaders and early career academics in different fields to have a “cross-generational” and cross-specialisation dialogue. From that, we will develop a funding bid to support at least one further workshop. Over the medium term, the aim is to develop a special issue of a general interest legal journal in order to disseminate initial findings. On the basis of further dialogue between scholars, the longer term aim is to produce an edited collection of essays to draw together the findings of the research project overall.

For further details about the project, please contact

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