CASE STUDY: HASHINI

Hashini is in her mid-20s and studying for the part-time MSt in International Human Rights Law (IHRL) from her home in Australasia. She has two previous degrees in Law and Political Studies, which she took in parallel. For the three years between graduating and starting the IHRL course Hashini worked on contract as a lawyer in public law and litigation, and also as a policy consultant for a government office in her country. She is additionally a board member of a global NGO[1] and spends much of her time travelling in connection with that work, which is undertaken on a voluntary basis.

Hashini has been deeply committed to, and active in, human rights issues since her schooldays and has long intended to become a human rights lawyer. The IHRL course provides her with the opportunity to deepen her academic knowledge of the field and to improve her research skills – as well as, she hopes, to form relationships with other human rights lawyers. She ultimately aims to work in human rights at international level, either with the UN or with an NGO.

The experience of distance learning

The structure of the IHRL course

IHRL is a two-year course comprising one taught online module, two five-week residential summer schools in Oxford each covering two taught modules (assessed by exam), and a dissertation during which students receive online supervision.

The course itself was preceded by a two-month induction designed to familiarise students with the online learning environment and, of course, with each other. During this period students read and discussed Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower* and posted an experimental assignment to the course's online submission system (CASS) to ensure that the technology worked. They then had a few weeks' break before starting the online taught module in January 2008.

Learning online

The online taught module was divided into six topics, each lasting three weeks and building on the previous topic. Week 1 was given over to reading the relevant section of the core text book, while week 2 was taken up by an online tutorial, for which students were split in two groups of 15, each led by a tutor (the groups remained the same throughout the module). During week 3 students prepared a 2000-word written assignment and submitted it electronically.

At first, during the induction period, Hashini sensed a lack of real discussion – more a set of questions and answers: "those initial discussions largely happened between 2 people rather than turning into broader discussions including more people – i.e. it was more of a question/answer feeling than the feeling of discussion that I get in current tutorial forums." Things improved once the course was fully under way, and Hashini enjoyed the diversity of views expressed: "responses that draw on personal experiences/work are frequent which also makes it more interesting."

The pattern of Hashini's contributions to the online discussions depended in part on her personal schedule:

> "If I know the end of my week will be busy I post early and check in when I can later in the week. If my week is reasonably relaxed I like to read others' comments and respond. This of course also depends on the issues we are discussing. Where I have had enough time to frame my opinions and/or I already have strong opinions

[1] Non-governmental organisation; anonymised here for reasons of confidentiality.

on an issue I am more likely to post first or early. On average I would say I check the discussion space 4 times a week."

She noted that other people tended to contribute more towards the end of the week, so that the discussion seemed to reach its peak quite late.

Hashini singled out two main strengths of online discussion: the thoughtfulness of responses ("students consider their thoughts more carefully when posting online rather than just speaking out in class") and the ability to link to Web-based resources ("people can include links to articles etc while expressing their views - which is brilliant").

She also read the discussions of the other group and noted the differences:

> "Our forum evolved more around the 3 essay questions we were given in each unit while the other group talked more about each of the readings. I liked discussions around issues/essay questions because it focused our thinking and helped us to flow nicely from discussion to writing an essay. I think focusing on issues rather than specific articles is a better way to draw out not only feedback on the arguments made in our readings but also our personal experiences as individuals and professionals working in various human rights arenas."

Hashini was careful always to project her genuine views in the discussion forum. Speaking to us during the summer residential session, she noted:

> "when I was writing my opinions online I'd give a lot more thought to it and I was very aware that people were… that was the sole representation of me if you like, and so I was much more careful about what I said and tried to match my responses a lot more to my sense of values, than I do now."

In contrast, once she was with the other students in the same physical space and was confident that people knew her real views, she was more likely to play devil's advocate.

Learning in the classroom

In early July the students convened in Oxford for their first summer residential session. This telescoped what would normally be a full term's study into three weeks, culminating in the exams. Writing in retrospect, Hashini summarised the impact of the residential session thus:

> "I loved it. [It] reminded my how much I enjoy a classroom/interactive atmosphere. I didn't like being away from my family and friends; however, knew I needed to - to enable me to focus on studying. It was especially nice to be able to meet/network with like-minded people."

She felt the timing (seven months into the course) "allowed us time to get up to speed on key issues and interact with each other in a thoughtful way before meeting in person."

The emergence of a learning community

Hashini felt that working extensively online with the NGO board had prepared her for working online with her fellow students. The big difference, though, was the fact that she had met her fellow board members before starting to collaborate with them online:

> "whereas this is sort of the other way around. But in terms of the actual working and the isolation, which I think is a unique thing for people to deal with, I was sort of used to working on my own but still being connected to other people."

At the start of the course, Hashini felt that it was probably more difficult to build relationships at a distance, and that misunderstandings could be a risk. However, she saw the value of the discussions during the induction period in introducing the students to each other and in encouraging interaction in the online "common room" as well as in the formal discussion forum: "There were also a few posts in the common room forum where people expressed both excitement and nerves about the coming work - this was very reassuring as I'm sure many of us were feeling the same way!"

She expected the sense of community to develop more at the summer residential session. Indeed, when she met us three weeks into the session, she observed two changes in relationships among the students: a greater sense of friendship and more humour:

> "it's a lot more like making friends than being in more of a colleague sort of relationship, which is what it was like online."
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> "online interactions were always in relation to human rights issues [...] so there's going to be inevitably a degree of seriousness about our discussion [...] Whereas here, because we're talking about so many different things in the course of a day it can be, you know, we can go from just sort of playing around to being very serious, which is good, yeah."

In summary, the summer residential session enabled the cohort to "build a sense of collective identity and has enabled us to have a pool of people to call upon to solve [human rights] issues (e.g. work related)."

Two months later about half of them were in regular contact: "We are currently discussing working on collaborative human rights projects and I know a few people have met up in person with others in my class when on overseas trips. I definitely think we have the collective will to stay in touch - however some people are definitely more committed to staying in touch than others. I'd say about 50% of us are in touch fairly regularly."

Hashini was so keen to continue contact that she suggested to the course director during the that the cohort should embark on a collaborative project independently of the course. In particular, she wanted to tap what she perceived to be its unrealised potential:

> "we could have enrolled in a Master's programme in our home countries or anywhere in the world that taught us substantively the same information. The magic of this course is that it brings together leaders and people engaged in human rights who have built up extensive networks around the world and … we need to capture and sort of utilise that magic a little bit more."

Technology and online learning

The IHRL course uses a customised version of Moodle, although it is referred to as the "course Website" rather than the "VLE" or "Moodle." As well as the formal discussion forums and the online common room, the Website includes a "notice board" for official administrative announcements and supporting resources such as the link to CASS, a guide to online etiquette, IT tutorials and guidance on the dissertation.

Hashini found the course Website and associated technology "a bit of a pain" at first, but "very friendly" once she got used to it. Submitting essays to CASS was something of a worry: not just the fear of technological failure, but also calculating the actual deadline (her home town was several hours ahead of GMT).

Access to technical support was one downside of online distance learning for Hashini "because you have to wait for responses from [the] IT team etc. rather than just asking another student to help you." Hashini had recourse to the IT support team in Oxford, but the main obstacle was the impossibility of visual communication, not the time difference: "When you're not very IT-savvy sometimes what seems like easy step-by-step instructions can be unhelpful. [...] it's more that they have to tell me what to do to fix the problem - we don't have the option that they show me how to do it." Fortunately, her partner was eventually able to help her solve her IT issues.

Coping with competing commitments

Hashini has always been a person who can pack a great deal into her life: "even at school I had... lots of different interests, I've been in the Green Group and Human Rights and Oxfam and, church stuff and study, so I think I've always had a few things going at once."

At the start of her course, Hashini had just finished a contract role as a lawyer and shortly thereafter took up another contract position as a campaigner with a global environmental

pressure group: "partially in their campaigns team on climate change, but also looking at some legal issues for them, which is working out brilliantly because they're extremely flexible with me [...] they're happy for me to sometimes work at home."

However, it is Hashini's voluntary work in the human rights field that is her real passion. Her involvement began when she learned about a past experience of human rights abuse within her wider family and now takes up 10 hours a week, not counting the longer periods taken up by numerous trips to meetings in far-flung places such as London, Hong Kong, the USA and Africa. In effect, Hashini's voluntary work constrains the employment she can take:

> "I've worked in public law mostly on contracts on a yearly basis or six monthly basis, primarily because I travel so much [...] I decided that when I was elected in 2005 for my first term that I would prioritise that role, and any work obligations would have to accommodate my voluntary life."

It essential that her employers are comfortable with that life, as well as with her studies: "I imagine a lot of people would be scared away by just the [NGO] thing, let alone the [NGO] and oh by the way I'm disappearing for a month and half to go and study at Oxford."

Hashini's personal life is also very precious and, having got married early in the course, she was starting to limit her outside commitments: "I was asked to give a lecture [...] the weekend before I was leaving to come [to Oxford]. And I at first said yes and then I told [my husband] and he said smiling, you were supposed to ask me first, and no I don't think you should do it a week before you head out to Oxford for a month and a half".

The role of technology in competing commitments

Because of the sensitive nature of both her voluntary and her paid work, Hashini has two laptops, both of which she had to bring to the summer residential session. For personal work (including studies), she tends to use the laptop provided by the NGO, as it is smaller and lighter. She also maintains four separate email accounts for the different areas of her life. The NGO and her current employer have their own encrypted email systems, which can create problems as she is not allowed to choose her own (i.e. more easily remembered) passwords but instead must memorise the ones given to her.

Telephony – both digital and mobile - plays an important role both in Hashini's employment and in her personal life. Skype is used extensively by the environmental group, with all workers logging on first thing in the morning. The organisation also provides her with a Web-enabled mobile phone so that she can pick up emails and associated attachments when out on business: "sometimes people call me when I'm out of the office and say we've emailed you x, y and z, and so if we're out meeting with politicians or whatever, I'll access it that way."

Hashini's family are scattered throughout the world, and in addition her friends are either travelling a great deal or moving away to better career opportunities especially in the UK She uses a variety of technologies for keeping in touch: Skype with her mother and sisters, and Facebook, which she finds more reliable when one of the parties is travelling. Hashini controls her presence on Skype by making herself invisible when she is online to avoid receiving unwanted calls. She also has two identities on Skype, using her two surnames to segregate work from personal use.

Hashini initially resisted the urge to join Facebook, but once she was online she realised that it is perfectly possible to control one's involvement: "it's really up to you how much you want to be involved, and I stay in close contact with a few people and not at all with the hundred or whatever other people who are on my contact list."

In terms of "social" technologies, Hashini increasingly reads blogs by environmental activists, and also the personal blogs kept by her friends as they travel around the world. She started watching more YouTube videos during her stay in Oxford as a way to keep in touch with the news: "I find absolutely no TV is great except you miss all the news." However, in order to relax fully, she prefers to get away from the computer altogether.