

# Law Students' "Poll Tax" to be abolished.

***Professor Gilbert, Head of the Department of Law, has stated that the system of charging £50.00 for course materials will end and a new system will be introduced before the start of the next academic year.***

At the first staff-student liaison committee meeting on the 22nd November 2000, concerns were raised about the recent introduction of the £50.00 fee for course materials. The year representatives, members of the law society and student union representatives collectively wanted answers as to why the charge was introduced.

The opinion felt by us all was that tuition fees already cover, in effect, 'our tuition' and that top-up charges proved an additional burden to many students. Ancillary points were made that other departments within the university were not charging such an inflated price for handouts; first years who were made known about the charges felt that the letter explaining them was unwelcoming; why it was necessary to charge a flat rate of £50.00 when some students received more handouts than others and why some electives incurred an additional fee on top.

Professor Gilbert attempted to shed some light on these concerns. He started by saying that he understood the points made and felt that the charge was a "poll tax" resulting in some individuals subsidising others. He clarified that tuition fees are paid directly to the university and are not paid to the department – and, even if they were paid to the department, the cost of materials is not included in such fees. Professor Gilbert illustrated the point that the department is subsidising its students on photocopying which no other department in the university currently does. In 1999/2000, he said, "*that the cost of undergraduate photocopying was £28,500 and even if every student paid the cost of £50.00, the total would only be £24,000*".

At the second SSLC meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> February 2001 the topic came up for discussion yet again. An e-mail survey poll conducted by Victoria West (third year LL.B representative) proved that 79% of students would rather download handouts from the internet than pay for photocopied materials. The qualification Professor Gilbert made vis-à-vis on-line materials was that copyright restrictions meant materials which had been cleared for paper distribution were not cleared for electronic distribution.

The Copyright Licensing Authority (CLA) is visiting the university this month and are assessing photocopying produced in other departments. If the law department can strike a new agreement with the CLA it will allow for the production of authorized copyright cleared course packs. Should the same be

possible, the department will pass on the cost of the licence to its students together with providing some subsidy.

While the “poll tax” price of £50.00 will be not charged to students next year, the department wishes to keep a single up-front payment: possibly on a course by course basis. Under the current system, students were paying for tutorial materials, case lists, and other articles that may not have had any direct relevance to their course of study. Under the new scheme, it is anticipated that case-lists will be removed to the Course Materials Repository and so will be available on-line.

Members of staff may have to keep a close eye on the packs they produce for their respective courses so as to ensure only the necessary articles and cases are included therein. A further reform that has been mooted is that essay titles and tutorial outlines ought to be provided free of charge.

If a new agreement is created with the CLA it seems that the future of law handouts is at the web’s disposal. Costs incurred thereby will therefore be on an individual and independent basis with those students who have PCs and printers in their rooms benefiting the most. Those now in the first year (or in the second year who took criminal law in their first year) will remember that Fernne Brennan’s criminal law handouts were located on the web and worked very well.

Finally, it is hard to envisage the CLA refusing to make a new agreement with the law department as many other departments within the university have their lectures/tutorials on-line along with other course materials. Additionally, as the law is developing at such an expeditious rate, it makes sense to have access to lecture materials and/or current cases and articles via the web.

To conclude, it was strongly believed that if the current system had carried on into the next academic year, the feeling of unrest, discontent and protest would have doubtless been inevitable. A correlation may have been drawn between the ‘poll tax’ imposed by the law department here and that imposed under the Thatcher Government in the early 1990s. Those with long memories will remember that the latter system was soon abolished and current law undergraduates ought to concur in thinking that the former has done well to follow in its footsteps.

**Students who wish to comment on the proposed changes, or who wish to express new ideas/suggestions, should e-mail the Staff Student Liaison Committee at [sslcug@essex.ac.uk](mailto:sslcug@essex.ac.uk)**

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