Written Report (40%) (Due March 31) (7-9 pages or 1800-2500 words),

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Organization: Halifax Refugee Clinic (HRC)

Supervisor: Julie Champagne – Executive Director of the HRC

My placement for the winter term of 2023 was with the Halifax Refugee Clinic, a non-profit organization based in Halifax. The mandate of this organization is the provision of legal services for refugee claimants in Nova Scotia. This includes guiding claimants through the legal process, scheduling hearings, providing the meeting place and technology to be able to attend those hearings (especially during the pandemic lockdowns when all hearings were moved online), compiling evidence and submitting documentation. This is important work because there is no legal aid for refugee claimants or non-status migrants in Nova Scotia. Because of this, they are very busy. They also provide settlement services such as assisting claimants in finding housing, understanding public transit systems and where to go for essentials. They also do local and national advocacy work around refugees. My work with the HRC was with the legal side of their services.

This year the HRC has a grant that allowed them to hire full-time lawyers. This made my placement completely remote because there were more people working in the office than in previous years. Unfortunately, that meant I did not get to attend any hearings or meet with clients in person. This work is completely done by the paid staff. For me this was not necessarily a bad thing as my semester was very busy between writing my thesis, other classes and working. Having a remote placement was nice because I was able to get the research done whenever I had the time without needing to go into the office. I do think I would have felt more connected to the work if there had been at least a couple times where I could have met the team and seen them in action.

I met with Julie Champagne at the beginning of the term via zoom to discuss the work of the clinic, what I would be doing and how it would be used by the staff in the refugee cases. She provided several documents to give context, more details and examples of the documents I would be producing. Past that first meeting I did not speak to Julie again, although I did email a couple times with her when didn’t hear anything from the lawyers during my first couple weeks. I had more regular contact with the lawyers who gave me my assignments and answered my questions when I needed clarification. My accountability to Julie was through email by CC-ing her on the emails between me and the lawyers.

My role was as a researcher for the on-staff lawyers. I primarily worked with Gabriella Utreras Sandoval. She would send me a description of the case and the focus of my research. This would be a country and the primary issue of the refugee claim such as gender discrimination, political persecution, or violence and discrimination against LGBTQ+ persons. I am not going to share any specific details about the cases I researched to prioritize the privacy of the claimants.

I worked on three cases. Each required a summary of the National Documentation Package and further country condition research. The National Documentation Package is a catalogue of resources compiled by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada and each country has its own set of documents. My job was to summarize relevant sections of the NDP in my own words and providing quotes where they would be useful. The NDP is already available to the immigration board and therefore is important to know what information they are working off of in order to point to the sources that support the claim. The summary will be used by lawyers as they compile documents for the claimant’s hearing.

The second document I created for each case was my own research to further support the claim. This is formatted similarly to the NDP summary where I would summarize and pull quotes from relevant sources. This includes reliable media sources, governmental reports, United Nations reports, and non-profit documents. I would submit these documents to Gabriella, and she would let me know if there was an area where she needed more information. This happened in one case where her initial instructions gave me three topics to research but a week after I submitted, she emailed me again to ask for more research on a connecting topic.

The challenge for this second document on country conditions is there is no end point to the research. For topics on recent developments, there may not be a lot of news coverage yet or detailed reports for NGOs or governments. At a certain point you just have to trust that you have tried all of the possible searches to find relevant sources. It does take a lot of time to do this because most of the time is spent filtering sources that are connected to but not necessarily relevant to the case.

I spent the first week of my placement reviewing the documents Julie sent me. These helped me better understand my role and how my work would help the lawyers with theirs. I had to follow up with Julie in the second week to request a research project. I then received my first assignment. I reviewed the Basis of Claim form (BOC) for the claimant to understand their story. I then dove into the NDP summary and country condition research. It was really interesting to learn about another country in a much more in-depth way and through a specific lens of human rights and the lived experience of the folks who are now in Halifax. I asked Gabriella some clarifying questions to be able to complete the research and she was great at replying quickly and confirming that the work I had done was on the right track. I was able to focus my country condition research better after that and completed that assignment in the fourth week of the placement. I was then assigned an additional research topic relevant to that same case. It was a challenge because not a lot of analytical work had been done on the topic and most of the sources I found did not help to support the claim. It was a challenge to sift through articles that did not appear useful and to come up with creative ways to research. The topic was not going to have a clear top five list of relevant sources off of one search and required me to come up with different ways of framing the issue and relevant key terms that might bring up a useful source.

While I was working on this topic, I was sent my second case. This was a simpler topic to research, and I found a lot of relevant sources quite quickly. The NDP summary, however, took a long time because the documents in the NDP were quite long. I used key word searches and the table of contents for the longer reports to try and narrow my focus to the most relevant sections. I still took time to review the sections that did not seem immediately relevant because they can sometimes cite other reports or sources that do have relevant information. I did enjoy the active engagement that was required of this work to find how different organizations talk about certain issues, the terms they use that could help me find additional sources.

I was assigned my final research assignment in tenth week. This case came with several documents that explained the case as well as a previous country condition document that had a section relevant to this case. The first step I took was familiarizing myself with those documents, writing down key words, especially from the BOC form because it is written by the claimant who may use different terms than I would to describe the same phenomenon. I then reviewed the sources in the NDP summary to determine which sections would be relevant. My country condition research is on-going but I have discussed an early April deadline with Gabriella and will be submitting all of my final documents to her this week.

I found that all the deadline were quite flexible and if I needed more hours to fill I could take more time to research the cases I already had. It was helpful that Gabriella was so good at responding quickly and letting me know the timeline she needed.

I was one of two students on placement with the clinic. Ellen did the same work as me. We never worked together in person and she took up more projects assigned by Thiago Buchet, the other on-staff lawyer. When he would email us with an assignment, he’d say we could decide depending on our workloads, who would work on it. When those emails came in, I was already working on a topic for Gabriella, so Ellen would take Thiago’s assignment. This was an easy way for the work to be split between us. I might have been nice to work in-person together to talk about the research and discus strategies and where we typically find good information.

Overall, I did enjoy my placement. It was eye-opening especially in the beginning about the amount of work needed to see a refugee claimant through the process. It made me appreciate their work even more. In future years, there may be opportunity to go into the office and see the lawyers and staff in action. I do think that this placement can be as simple or as complex as you would like it to be. I appreciated the simplicity of it because it allowed me to balance all of my other responsibilities but if the placement is a primary focus of your semester, I think you could push to be more involved. At the start of the semester, Julie said there was potential for policy research work for the settlement side of their operations. The clinic does advocacy work and right now they are working on policy recommendations for the local government I did not hear anything about that after our initial meeting. It seems like there may be opportunities to do more than is offered virtually, but it would require more initiative and potentially more hours than are required of you to see it happen. The clinic staff are very busy and managing volunteers takes time, even if you are taking care of some of their workload. If you want more than a research position, it will not be handed to you. The HRC does amazing work and it was an honour to contribute even a small amount to it.