It’s the final day of the Comparative Public Policy and Law Reform seminar, team-taught by Dean Phoebe A. Haddon and Crystal Edwards, Director of Graduate Legal Studies and Academic Administration. Students are presenting talks about their final papers, the capstone project for the class.

They sound like seasoned experts on international court decisions as they discuss topics ranging from lawsuits involving pollution by oil companies in Ecuador, to comparative nuclear power policies in Germany and Saudi Arabia, to water disputes between Turkey, Syria, and Iraq along the Euphrates River. As PowerPoint slides flash on a screen at the head of the class, they outline the disagreements and present possible “normative conclusions” and potential reforms before fielding critiques and questions from their classmates.

“Is Texaco essentially getting two bites of the apple by arguing against due process violations?” asks one student about the oil company lawsuit. “Have you considered the irony that Germany buys energy from France, which produces 75 percent of its power through nuclear production?” asks another in reference to a decision by Germany to eliminate nuclear power production by 2022.

“The idea of the course is to get students to think about how different legal systems work,” says Haddon, who is teaching the course with Edwards for the second time. “Hopefully, they’ll gain a better appreciation for our legal system, but also an understanding that there may be better ways of resolving problems and addressing reforms that we don’t necessarily buy into.”

Students read papers and spend time talking about common law versus civil law systems as well as the role in other countries of law reform commissions, an independent body set up by a government to consider the state of laws in a jurisdiction and make recommendations or proposals for legal changes or restructuring. To help the class understand the types of work law reform that commissions undertake, the professors beam in, via Skype, two law commissioners—one from the United Kingdom and one from Canada—to interact with the students.

It was the highlight of the course for first-year student Lisa Piccinini. “I thought that was awesome to see on the ground how law commissions actually work,” she says. “To see how countries are actually making reforms through these commissions, specifically in the U.K. and Canada.”

Both faculty bring their own areas of expertise to the seminar. In practice, Edwards worked in corporate law with an international affairs specialty and Haddon is a Constitutional law expert. “I teach Constitutional law, so I like to talk about the values behind the Constitution,” Haddon says. “Why is it that other constitutions are framed differently? What affects talking about constitutions as changing documents versus static documents? Whether you’re in a civil law or common law context, there is a need for change, but how does government respond to that? What are the systems or other factors that promote or deny change?”

Students consider these questions as they frame their final papers—which, combined with class participation, are the lone basis for their grades. Edwards and Haddon work extensively with each student on crafting the papers, which are also circulated to every student before the in-class presentations. “That way, they’ll be able to engage in the presentation, ask really good questions, and give their peers good feedback,” says Edwards, who notes the seminar is a prerequisite for summer externships at law reform commissions around the world.

“This collaborative feedback model also helps them improve their own writing. After this seminar, I’m very confident to send our students off very well prepared, with good strong research skills and good strong writing skills.”

After the final presentation is given, Haddon thanks the students for their participation. “Your papers were very good,” she says. “They’re a great testimony to your hard work.”

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—Dean Phoebe Haddon