Law students get to help as they learn

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A NEW National University of Singapore law school scheme will give undergrads hands-on experience by helping the less privileged who face legal problems.

Under the scheme, NUS law students will assist in cases assigned by the Legal Aid Bureau (LAB) through a law professor who is also a practising lawyer representing the cases in court.

Known as the Law Clinic under the Clinical Legal Education programme, it is the first of its kind in Singapore that allows students to opt for it as a course requirement and earn credits that count towards their degree.

Under this scheme, students help draft court documents, take statements, do research and prepare clients from the LAB for court.

These cases can range from divorce and family-related matters to other disputes and civil claims.

NUS Associate Professor Lim Lei Theng, who is also assistant director at the LAB, will supervise the students and act as the lawyer in the assigned cases.

To be eligible for such legal aid, applicants have to satisfy a means and merits test to show their low income status.

LAB records show a steady rise in the number of applicants for legal aid in the last three financial years, each of which starts from April 1 and ends on March 31 of the following year.


Senior Minister of State for Law and Home Affairs Ho Peng Kee told law students yesterday that the “valuable practical experiences” they would gain from the scheme would benefit them, regardless of which area of law they choose to go into.

Professor Ho was speaking at the signing of the memorandum of understanding for cooperation between the LAB and NUS Law Faculty on the programme.

His sentiments were echoed by undergrads who had participated in a pilot run of the programme since last October.

Mr Justin Kwek and Ms Hu Huimin told The Straits Times that they did not want their academic studies in law to be divorced from the realities on the ground.

And they found the hands-on experience that they sought in the Law Clinic programme with the Legal Aid Bureau.

For Mr Kwek, 25, who graduated in July, taking up a legal aid case taught him that it is difficult to say “no” to the man on the street although the law may say “no”.

The client he helped was in his 50s, jobless and on the verge of going blind, and had sought legal aid to reduce maintenance payments to his former spouse.

Going by the textbook, the man had no case. But the work he did together with Prof Lim, the course supervisor, helped convince the court to use its inherent powers to reduce the maintenance sum.

“The scheme has given me a chance to give back to society the things which I had taken from law school,” Mr Kwek said.

Ms Hu, 23, a final-year student, also urged others to opt for the course.

“The Law Clinic is relevant because I want to be a lawyer who can relate and serve ordinary people we see on the streets,” she said.