

[« Return to article](#)[Print this](#)**The Straits Times**

www.straitstimes.com

Published on Sep 11, 2012

Law schools debate on pro bono work

By bryna sim

SHOULD pro bono work be made compulsory for all lawyers?

A team of three representing the National University of Singapore (NUS) argued for it, saying lawyers have an "intrinsic responsibility" to provide free legal aid.

They took on another trio representing Singapore Management University (SMU), in a debate yesterday organised by the Law Society as part of its inaugural Pro Bono Week.

The SMU team opposed the motion to mandate pro bono work, arguing that a "compulsory culture of volunteerism" was an oxymoron. The NUS team shot down their suggestion that compulsion would lead to shoddy work, arguing that slipshod results also occur under non-pro bono circumstances.

The SMU team argued that society - rather than lawyers alone - ought to be responsible for those who cannot afford lawyers. They called for a public defenders' office and suggested that those who did not want to do pro bono work could contribute to a fund to pay those willing to do so, albeit at a less-than-market rate.

In real life, this issue came to the fore in January when Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong said, at the opening of Legal Year 2012, that he was mulling over whether to make pro bono work a criterion for Senior Counsel appointments. Currently, a recommendation adopted by the Law Society since 2007 urges every lawyer to pledge to commit 25 hours a year towards providing free legal assistance.

Two students from each team had been given the topic a few weeks ago and they had to find a third debater from the legal fraternity. The NUS team was joined by Mr Vishal Harnal from Drew & Napier while the SMU team was joined by Mr Abraham Vergis, vice-chairman of the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme Committee.

"This event is meant to bring together law undergraduates and practitioners in a spirit of learning and mentorship," said Mr Lim Tanguy, director of the Pro Bono Services Office which is primarily funded by the Law Society.

Agreeing, its director of community relations Shahrany Hassan said that because the legal fraternity has differing views on the motion, the organisers felt the debate would be "very relevant".

The SMU team won the debate, but even after it ended, discussions on the motion continued over pastries and coffee.

Ms Malathi Das, pro bono ambassador of the Law Society who was a judge at the debate, said people generally volunteer to do pro bono work.

But NUS law student Sherrie Chong, 20, one of the debaters, said: "I believe pro bono work should be mandatory for young lawyers. If they work under partners who are not interested in pro bono work, then they are denied that chance."

brynasim@sph.com.sg

Copyright © 2012 Singapore Press Holdings. All rights reserved.