In the summer of 2013 I was lucky enough to be offered a placement with the Pro Bono Services Office in Singapore. The placement was organised through the Queen Mary Pro Bono Group and consisted of a two week attachment in a legal aid clinic in central Singapore.

Having never travelled alone before each initial part of the trip was as nerve-wracking as it was exciting, but I made it safely to Singapore and navigated my way to my hostel in 32 degree heat and a day later set off for my placement. The Pro Bono Services Office is split into two divisions: the Community Legal Clinic and the Criminal Legal Aid Service. The former provides free legal advice in weekly clinics to Singaporean residents in need; there is no means testing and so the service is absolutely overwhelmed with clients. Conversely the Criminal Legal Aid Service provides legal representation to those charged with a criminal offence and service users are subjected to a financial means test. Nevertheless the service is stretched to maximum capacity. As a volunteer, I was able to experience both aspects of the work done by the Pro Bono Services Office.

Whilst in the Community Legal Clinic my main role was booking clients in for appointments both over the phone and in person. As English is the official language of Singapore I thought this would be plain sailing, however, many clients spoke Mandarin as their native language and even those that did not struggled to understand my accent. The other six volunteers were all Singaporean and also all Mandarin speakers so fortunately I was able to rely on their help when a client could not understand me. Additionally within a couple of days I began to pick up certain Singaporean mannerisms that helped me communicate more easily over the phone. For example, it is common to say ‘lah’ at the end of the sentence simply as a friendly affectation; many understood me better when I ran my sentences together and added ‘lah’ at the end! The role was gratifying, particularly when engaging with a client in person because they were always so happy that someone was willing to hear their side of the story. Legal representation is not freely available to those with a low income in Singapore, and so any legal assistance is absolutely invaluable to those facing legal action or injustice.

The Criminal Legal Aid Service provided a more varied experience. My first role was similar to that in the Community Legal Clinic, I booked walk-in clients in for appointments with a solicitor to assess whether they were eligible for free representation. This was a difficult experience as all the clients had criminal charges against them and so were unsure of their futures. Singapore’s justice system is incredibly harsh in comparison to the UK, they still sentence people to caning and the death penalty, consequently though, the nation’s crime rate is extremely low.

My second role was to interview clients in court to personally assess their eligibility for representation. As a young female I found this particularly intimidating, I had to sit opposite male prisoners that were in chains and calmly ask them to recount their version of events. Several were agitated and spoke of further violence they would like to inflict on people when they got the chance. Yet often they then said ‘that is off the record’ and so I was unable to include those statements in my report. The report that I wrote up contained personal details, the defendant’s statement of facts and my decision on whether they should receive legal representation. This was difficult because the process leans towards subjectivity, unlike in the UK where, in principle, anyone who cannot afford a lawyer is given access to one. Furthermore, as a temporary volunteer, I felt ill-equipped to make such important decisions, indeed decisions that could decide whether a man spent the rest of his life in prison or was caned. I sought a lot
of help from the CLAS staff throughout this and was assured that all my decisions would be
double-checked by a more experienced member of the team.

In addition after gaining some interviewing experience in court I was able to travel to the
women’s prison on the far side of Singapore to interview female prisoners and assess whether
they wanted or would be eligible for legal representation. This is an important role as
sometimes women will not seek out the service because of the stigma associated with
criminality. Indeed many of the women I interviewed told me their families did not know that
they were in prison and they had kept it secret because it would bring shame on them. This
experience was fascinating but heart-breaking, many of the women I interviewed were very
young and did not fully understand what was happening. This really brought home the
importance of legal aid, if someone does not even understand what they are accused of then
they do not stand a chance of fighting their own case successfully.

Throughout my time in Singapore a very high profile fraud case was being tried in the
Subordinate Courts where I was volunteering. The head of the Harvest Church in Singapore (a
cult-like religious organisation that bears similarities to Scientology) was accused of using
supporters’ money to fund his wife’s unsuccessful music career. On one day, all the volunteers
were able to get tickets to sit in on the case, by coming in and queuing up from 7am with the
reporters. This was an insightful experience; the case received as much attention in Singapore as
the news hacking trial at the Old Bailey has here in London. I saw several Singaporean celebrities
giving evidence and saw some very well executed cross-examination. Overall this was definitely
a highlight of my trip.

As well as spending time volunteering at the Pro Bono Services Office I was offered work
experience at Reed Smith LLP, an American law firm that has close ties with Queen Mary. This
was an invaluable opportunity, particularly as the firm have now offered me a training contract
to begin in 2015. The Singapore office is the firm’s newest office and so only 11 lawyers work
there which meant I was made to feel at home straight away. I was able to attend a talk on
shipping law from a London QC which was quite technical but interesting. Also the Director of
Learning for Europe, the Middle East and Africa gave several workshops to the whole office
(including me as a temporary staff member) on presentation, time management and
organisation skills. He then gave me a one-to-one session on competencies and career
development, an absolutely unique opportunity for me to learn from a very senior member of
the firm. I sat in on several meetings and spoke through claim submissions which some of the
partners to get a better picture of the work that the office in Singapore carries out. All of this
was followed by a drinks reception to introduce a new partner to their team. I hope to be able
to return to the Singapore office to complete a six month seat as part of my training contract.

I would like to thank the Expeditions Fund for enabling me to have this incredible experience.
Not only did it greatly increase my confidence and improve my legal CV but ultimately it secured
me a graduate job as a trainee solicitor in London. I could not have travelled to Singapore
without the funding I received and so for that I am truly grateful.