Dear All,

In the period between the 18th August and 1st September 2019 I had the immense pleasure of being given the opportunity to become an Intern within the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme (CLAS) of the Law Society of Singapore Pro Bono Services. This undertaking was introduced to me by the Queen Mary Pro Bono Society and supported financially by the Expeditions Fund of Queen Mary University of London.

The Law Society of Singapore Pro Bono Services deals predominantly with the expansion of access to justice within Singapore’s legal realm and the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme is just one of many programmes which the Office has been running. Along with CLAS, there has been a number of community legal clinics, focused on civil matters (CLCs), Law Awareness workshops as well as specialised ad hoc clinics on exceptional matters.

The Criminal Legal Aid Scheme is aimed at the provision of legal representation to particularly vulnerable members of society and this is indeed where my internship was focused mostly on. Having in mind the exceptionally strict legal system in Singapore, CLAS tried to enlarge the opportunity for people to get legal representation within criminal courts.

My work during my stay in Singapore was based on the registration of applicants to that Criminal Legal Aid Scheme and assisting them in the process before them being selected for representation. This entailed once again a lot of work with vulnerable applicants. And I would not be able to stress enough on the importance of the skills this work has allowed me to develop.

It did not simply teach me patience in my understanding of the legal and non-legal issues of the applicant (having in mind all of them were charged with criminal offences), but essentially enabled me to learn how to be compassionate with one’s issues and how to maximize the assistance I could provide them both on a personal and on a professional level.

The process of registration under the scheme itself included 5 steps – firstly filling out a registration form along with a set of documents they needed to possess. After that two interviews would be conducted in order to assess the means and
merits of the applicant to receive legal aid and representation – to what extend their financial position would be able to justify giving them legal aid and whether the case alone held the merit to be continued with on the side of the CLAS office. While I did not have direct involvement within the means test interviews, I was heavily involved in the process of interviewing applicants under the merits test.

The merits test itself heavily relied on the cases of each applicant. This made me further understand the law in the area as well as acknowledge how it may apply to the personal circumstances of a person.

As I had not yet undertaken Criminal Law as a module within my degree also allowed me to get a grasp of it before the beginning of my second year (when the module is undertaken). I can say now that I feel as if I have a great exposure to the topics that most people find themselves connected with for the first time in my year. This practical exposure is also key to the better understanding of the subject now, as the practicality of my work within CLAS inevitably made it easier to see the live application of theories and principles, often obscure to the regular bystander and even law student.

Furthermore, the fact that there were key differences within the legal systems of Singapore and the UK makes me recognize now how big of a comparative analysis I would be able to make. This exposure has benefited my development as an aspiring barrister and has further made me realise the importance of the operation of the Criminal Justice system.

Apart from the office work, I was also able to attend court and witness real life advocacy, as well as what the impact of the legal representation provided was. This was truly exciting!

Lastly travelling to Singapore allowed me to get to know a set of different cultures and mindsets. Being rated one of the most diverse states in the world I acquainted myself with people from different nations, social classes and understandings, underlying this multicultural place.

I tried different cuisines and had the chance to chat with people whose mindset is so different from mine, that is was fascinating how we are even communicating. I also experienced delicious coffee, which I would never be able to forget.

In conclusion, Singapore gave me an invaluable experience, especially considering this was my first ever visit to Asia. The exposure I was under has made me understand the high-calibre opportunities Queen Mary provides and will hold me forever grateful both to the Queen Mary Pro Bono Society and the Expeditions Fund!