

# NUS law module assesses students on pro bono work



NUS final-year law students Charis Wong (left, facing camera) and Lee Wei Liang (beside her) speaking with migrant workers at Home. They are among the pioneer batch in NUS' new legal clinic module.  
ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

## Olivia Ho

While most budding lawyers prepare for their exams by poring over stacks of notes, a group of final-year law students spent this term helping foreign workers.

They are the pioneer batch in the National University of Singapore's (NUS) new legal clinic module. It assesses students not through written exams, but on how they help migrant workers in legal matters.

The module, which ran from July to November last year, is the first here to examine students through a migrant worker legal clinic.

Work assessed could range from explaining work injury or salary claims to workers to helping a qualified lawyer defend a worker in court.

NUS Law senior lecturer Sheila Hayre explained that foreign workers have little access to legal help.

For instance, they cannot apply to the Legal Aid Bureau, which provides legal aid and advice to Singaporeans and permanent residents of limited means.

Ms Hayre said the students have dealt with about 10 clients this semester. "Sometimes, it helps the clients just to know that someone is willing to listen to their story and that there is legal help out there if they need it – even if they ultimately decide to give up their case and just go home."

She and fellow course convenor Jaclyn Neo started the module because they saw that many students wanted to do more pro bono – or voluntary – work, but could not carve out the time in between assignments and exams.

Student Charis Wong, 22, could only do 20 to 30 hours a term in the past. "But with this module, I was able to spend 100 hours," she said.

The students volunteered an average of 10 hours weekly at legal clinics run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the Humanitarian Organization for Migration

Economics (Home). They also did a three-week internship with the Ministry of Manpower, allowing them a rare insight into the inner workings of how it handles migrant worker issues.

Prof Neo said: "We work with all the different stakeholders – the

### EYE-OPENING LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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**MS JUNE LIM**, of Eden Law Corporation, one of the pro bono lawyers who the students assisted

Government, the community of migrant workers, the NGOs and the pro bono lawyers. As a law school, we believe that we are in a good position to perform this crucial bridging function."

Not being full-fledged lawyers, the students cannot dispense legal advice on their own, but they help to interview clients, conduct research and prepare files for the pro bono lawyers representing the workers in court.

Ms June Lim of Eden Law Corporation, one of the pro bono lawyers whom the students assisted, said the cases the students helped her with involved domestic helpers who wanted to take their employers to court for abusing them.

Ms Lim said: "I hope (the students) are more sensitised to these abuse issues and that it's opened their eyes. I hope that when they get called to the Bar, they will take on some of these cases themselves."

Student Lee Wei Liang, 24, said cultural differences posed a challenge. "It was difficult to get them to reveal certain facts. We had to learn to build rapport with them. I learnt to engage them like I would with any Singaporean, or any other human being. They are human beings facing difficulties."

His classmate, Ms Wong, recalled an interview she had with a domestic helper from Myanmar who was charged with molesting a child.

"She showed me a picture of her young son," she said. "That was when I realised what she was going through – she couldn't work and she couldn't go back to see her child as her passport was impounded."

The charges were dropped, but she was repatriated the next morning. Ms Wong waited two hours at the airport, hoping to see her one last time, but in vain.

"These people passed on their life stories to us," she said. "Then, in a snap, they were gone."

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