



Laidlaw Cohort 2025
Summer 2 Reflective Report – Leadership in Action

Bridging the Gap - Criminal Legal Aid in Singapore

Bhadra Panicker

Organisation: Pro Bono SG, Singapore

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I spent the summer of 2026 working with Pro Bono SG, the charitable wing of the Law Society of Singapore. The organisation is intrinsic to ensuring access to justice in the country, which is characterised by its diversity of culture, religion, citizenship and socio-economic status. Besides providing traditional legal aid (assigning free lawyers to provide legal advice and if necessary, representation), they are also deeply engaged with the local communities they operate in. PBSG runs a legal hot line staffed entirely by volunteer students, numerous community legal clinics scattered around the city-state, a specialised clinic for migrant workers, as well as free resources and legal empowerment programmes, especially for union members and school students.

During my time there, I worked within the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme (CLAS), specifically in the Representations sector. CLAS, partially funded by the state, provides criminal legal assistance to foreign applicants, and those unable to afford a private lawyer or access the state's Public Defenders scheme. The typical CLAS applicant faces criminal charges in Singapore for non-capital offences - and they may approach PBSG either privately or through the state if they are being held in custody. Within the organisation, my role involved conducting legal research, attending court hearings, client interviews and free clinic consultation sessions.

However, the journey to finding and doing my Leadership in Action project was not a short or easy one. At the start of the year, I was accepted to travel to Mexico City and work with MakeSense through the Laidlaw Foundation's Central Projects. Even though Trinity's Laidlaw Co-ordinator, Kate, Dani & Keni at Makesense Mexico, and myself all worked long and hard to put together the extensive list of documents required for the visa application, my Mexican visa did not come through at the very last minute. Getting the devastating news that I would not be able to do my planned LiA this summer, after many months of going to the Mexican Embassy in Dublin threw a spanner in the works. As a very meticulous, Type A planner, I had thoroughly charted my summer to account for internships, extracurricular activities, travel, and my LiA - it was therefore not easy to rip up the plan and throw it in the bin!

It is at this juncture that I appreciated the leadership training I had received during my LEAD days in Trinity, especially our session on planning the Leadership in Action summer during our leadership retreat in Carlingford at the start of the year. Hearing stories of LiAs gone wrong from past scholars - accommodation issues, unfulfilling workplaces, socio-political crises around the world - had given me the knowledge that things do not always go to plan. At no point did I therefore feel like I was navigating the summer alone or like an exception in facing a messy LiA situation within the cohort - and I am truly grateful.

So armed with Kate's encouragement, I therefore found myself sitting at my desk in the middle of July searching through the Laidlaw Scholars' Network to look for organisations that might take me on at extremely short notice. I spent my time sending countless emails - reaching out to organisations and scholars. I was lucky enough to receive a reply from Neha, a past scholar from Toronto, who told me about her work with Pro Bono SG last summer. The day after I emailed them, I spoke with Yoges from PBSG on Zoom.



Before I knew it, the LiA project was planned, the accommodation was booked, and I was in the middle of a 24 hour travel day from Dublin to Singapore. One very jetlagged weekend later, I found myself in Chinatown in the heart of the city-state, navigating the short stroll from my hostel to the State Courts in Havelock Square that would quickly become a familiar one over the next month.

Working in the organisation itself was an eye-opening experience. Up until this point, I had only been in Irish legal organisations and studied Irish law - however, being able to see and work within an entirely different, yet similar criminal legal framework was a valuable opportunity. Ireland and Singapore share histories as colonised states whose legal systems are deeply influenced by British common law - making it easy for me to understand the vocabulary. However, while Ireland relies heavily on precedent, Singapore's geographical and colonial proximity to India meant that the criminal system is highly codified through the Penal Code 1871. What this means in practice, and for those unfamiliar with the law, is that there is one official document which lists illegal acts, rather than the relevant law being scattered across past cases and their judgments - which makes legal research more efficient and centralised.

The theme of efficiency was apparent throughout the system. The state has rigid sentencing guidelines for judges to refer to when making decisions on cases - in contrast to the more uncodified system that is followed in Ireland. The emphasis on efficiency was majorly dictated by Singapore's emphasis on maintaining a hard-line approach to crime - due to the nation's history of. While on one hand, it is often argued that this focus ensures consistency, it would be dishonest to omit the criticism that the system risks turning draconian in the absence of provisions to be flexible and adapt the law to unique circumstances which may not be covered by the codified document.

Viewing the system up close through the work I did during my time in Singapore revealed more insights. While I am unable to refer to the factual details of the cases I worked on, due to legal restrictions, I got the chance to explore numerous areas of Singaporean criminal law - from theft, assault, housebreaking, to immigration, customs, and fraud.

The experience has left me with one big lesson about leadership - sometimes, it means understanding nuance and doing the unpopular thing, because it may be the right thing to do. Criminal legal aid - ensuring that all persons accused of crime have access to a capable lawyer - is not traditionally the most popular. The trope that taxpayer money should not be used to "defend criminals" is an infamous one. However, for a criminal justice system to function efficiently, and to maintain fundamental rights - to a fair trial, to innocence until proven guilty, a person's financial status must not dictate their access to justice. Having seen lawyers' strikes at the Bar of Ireland, where currently a flat-fee system for criminal legal aid is being proposed, the importance of having a strong criminal legal aid system was not lost on me. In fact, having spent the past summer researching miscarriages of justice, that is, situations where people were falsely accused and convicted of crime, ultimately doing my LiA within the sphere of criminal defence felt like a natural continuation of my first summer as a Laidlaw Scholar.

Working alongside the lawyers at PBSG deepened this lesson, which taught me that true advocacy required approaching every applicant with profound empathy and completely free



from judgment - always keeping an open mind regardless of the allegations they may face. Recognising that our clients were navigating what was likely the darkest, most terrifying period of their lives allowed me to see, in real-time, what it means to lead with genuine humanity. This truth became all the more relevant when confronting the stark reality of the system, since criminal legal aid applicants must pass the means test, many of the alleged offenses committed were of the economic nature and often born from dire financial situations. This helped me realise that leadership is not about condemning a person's worst moments, but about being able to understand and sympathise with the complex, often unseen human struggles that drove them there.

While I have numerous interesting stories to tell about the experience - from having to do impromptu translations in my fifth language for a teleinterview with a client in prison - to being questioned by police officers in the Singaporean Supreme Court, it is perhaps more relevant to focus on the personal reflections that my summer has left me with.

Although there were numerous challenges along the way, I strongly believe that they helped me grow - both as a person, and as a leader. The primary one, which has been noted numerous times in this reflection, was making peace with things falling through left, right, and centre. From being unable to go to Mexico, to the major trial I was working on not going ahead in the end - dealing with the sheer disappointment of putting a lot of effort into something that did not come to fruition was unfortunately a consistent issue this summer. Ultimately, I learnt to become more comfortable with uncertainty and to view setbacks as part of the process rather than as a reflection of my own efforts. This taught me to be more adaptable, resilient, and appreciative of the opportunities that did materialise.

The extremely last minute nature of my project in Singapore meant that logistical issues regularly cropped up. A memorable example was the housing situation - due to the ban on short-term renting in the country, I had to spend the entirety of my LiA living in two pod capsule hostels - having to move when the first hostel I stayed in sold out. Ironing my shirts the night before for the extremely professional, legal environment, in my workplace and then having to be careful while in my little pod so as to not accidentally turn in my sleep and crease said shirts was definitely a learning curve that I was not expecting to encounter! While I was very lucky to find decent (for most part!) accommodation, I did learn to be resourceful - and laugh, of course, at some of the less glamorous realities of professional life!

Finally, even though the people in the organisation were extremely kind and welcoming, and I got to do impactful work, the Singaporean legal system is not the most transparent to foreigners. As the only international volunteer in the organisation, there were times when I felt that my involvement was limited simply because I was a foreigner, particularly when it came to being involved in certain aspects of the work. This was frustrating at times, but taught me to make the most of the opportunities I was given and to recognise the value of contributing in ways that I could.

Of all the things I loved about my LiA, the people undoubtedly stand out the most. I loved getting to know the lawyers and the other interns I worked with - their encouragement and patience with me when I struggled to understand the system that was entirely new to me at times was deeply appreciated. I also had the opportunity to connect with other Laidlaw



Scholars in the country - I will always be grateful I met incredible people like Cara, Bianca and Matthew! I also loved the food, particularly the opportunity to be adventurous, try things I had never encountered before, and learn to appreciate a completely different food culture.

More than anything, however, I think I discovered the power of community. The friendships, kindness and generosity I experienced throughout the summer reminded me how much people can shape an experience. In many ways, this was also one of my biggest lessons in leadership: leadership is not just about what you achieve yourself, but about the communities you build, the people you bring together, and the kindness you show along the way.