

HERBERT SMITH FREEHILLS SHOWCASES PROMISING NEW LEGAL TALENT AT THE FIRST- EVER OXFORD V CAMBRIDGE DISABILITY MOOT

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Firm news

As the UK marks Disability History Month, Herbert Smith Freehills' Ability Network has sponsored and help organise the first-ever Oxford v Cambridge Disability Mooting Championships, alongside members of the Oxford and Cambridge Law Faculties.

The event, held at the Sultan Nazrin Shah Centre, Worcester College, Oxford, from 15-16 November 2019, saw students Liam McKenna and Stephanie Bruce-Smith of Merton College, Oxford, win the top prize. Cambridge were runners up, with Alice Defriend and Cara Donegan, also receiving a prize for competing.

The final was judged by Professor Anne Davies, Herbert Smith Freehills Partner Adam Johnson QC and Professor Alison Young.

The competition consisted of two-days of mooting, which saw 18 teams of students go head-to-head in preliminary rounds, then semi-finals to reach the final stage of the competition. Students competed in pairs and a total of nine teams from Oxford and nine from Cambridge took part, with each moot lasting for an hour.

The moot problem and facts this year centred on disability discrimination, in an employment context for an employee with Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD).

Herbert Smith Freehills has been sponsoring and working with the Oxford University Disability Law and Policy Project to organise the flagship Oxford University Disability Moot for the past six years, but this is the first time the championship has been opened up to Cambridge students.

The event aims to promote the intellectual study of disability and its intersection with domestic and international law. The mooting championship is designed to promote the study of disability and the law and, in so doing, seeks to raise awareness of legal issues facing people with disabilities and the need to increase the representation of disabled people within the legal profession.

The quality of mooting in the competition was so high that the judges and organising committee used their discretion to award two further prizes to Charlie Liu (Oxford) and Alyssa Glass (Oxford), who both narrowly missed out on going forward to the finals and semi-finals.

Reflecting on his involvement and success in the event, winner Liam McKenna said:

"It was a joy to be involved with... the moot problem was one of the best I have worked with... the issues it raised, on mental health and the Equality Act, were very close to issues that I have seen in real life when working with a charity focussed on equalities law."

Cambridge runner-up, Cara Donegan, added: *"The moot problem was highly enjoyable, allowing room for interesting policy arguments on the hugely important area of disability discrimination law. The experience I had during the oral rounds was unparalleled... I would highly recommend participating in the moot to everyone as I believe that, due to the importance of raising awareness of the subject area, participation in this moot is much more meaningful compared to other competitions."*

Following the competition, there was a panel discussion on BAME individuals with disabilities, and the difficulties they face in the UK. The panel was chaired by Nomfundo Ramalekana, blog editor for the Oxford Human Rights Hub, and comprised of a number of pre-eminent academics and leaders of disability networks and charities.

Attendees at the event were also treated to a performance by Handy Voices Signing Choir; an award winning community choir based in Oxford which comprises of individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, Mixed SEN and members from the LGBTQI community.

In the lead-up to the championship, Herbert Smith Freehills' Ability Network hosted two mooting and mental health workshops at the two Universities, for the first time, in order to promote discussion around mental wellness and prepare students for the upcoming championships.

Herbert Smith Freehills Partners Dan Hudson and Adam Johnson QC led the Cambridge mooting skills session, and Partner Tom Leech QC joined Dan in leading the Oxford session. The sessions introduced students to the 'dos and don'ts of mooting' using anecdotes from the speakers' personal experiences and examples from the recent Miller/Cherry judgment.

This year's competition saw 74 students apply to take part and the Grand Final was watched by an audience of over 100 people.

Dr Marie Tidball , Director of Oxford University's Disability Law and Policy Project, said:

"This was a high quality final, the arguments made were well thought out and engaging. We have had wonderful feedback from the mooters on what they have learned about disability law and considering wider issues affecting disabled people. They are eager to take their learning forward into their future careers. Improving legal thinking and practice around disability for future members of the legal profession is exactly what we want to achieve so, all in all, the event has been a resounding success."

Herbert Smith Freehills Partners Dan Hudson and Tim Leaver are both founding members of the organising committee and both played a role in judging the competitors over the two days.

Dan said:

"We were incredibly impressed by the quality of the advocacy on display by the Oxford and Cambridge students. I was personally humbled by the experience, in particular of the panel discussion which brought important issues affecting people with disabilities to the fore. HSF are enormously thankful for the efforts of the Organising Committee in putting together such an intellectually challenging and important event."

Tim added:

"This event is extremely important to HSF and the Universities; it is an innovative way of showcasing some of the challenges faced both within the legal profession and much more widely, by people affected by issues related to disability. Since we started to work with Marie and the Oxford organising Committee in 2014, the Oxford competition has seen 120 competitors, and attracted a total audience of nearly 800 people. It is vitally important that we do what we can to encourage more students with disabilities to enter the legal profession, as well improving legal and practical thinking in disability-related issues."

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