

# Students join the fight for access to justice

AS PART OF THE NATIONAL ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND PRO BONO CONFERENCE, THE LIV'S SOCIAL MEDIA TEAM RAN A NATIONAL FACEBOOK COMPETITION.

**Three days. 30 voices. One message. More than 350 delegates convened from 20-22 March, at the fourth National Access to Justice and Pro Bono Conference, to hear about and discuss issues facing the access to justice sector in Australia and abroad.**

The conference was a joint initiative of the Law Council of Australia, the LIV and the National Pro Bono Resource Centre (NPBRC). Conference sessions focused on the overarching theme of “communicating justice” in the delivery of legal assistance. So, as part of the conference, the LIV’s Social Media team ran a National Facebook Competition, open to all current law students across Australia. Facilitated through the Young Lawyers’ Facebook page, the competition offered law students passionate about access to justice the opportunity to attend the conference by submitting a 200 word essay response regarding issues facing universal access to justice.

**Topic: “Unmet legal need in Australia means universal access to justice is unattainable – Discuss”**

In just three weeks, 68 entries were received from 17 universities across Australia and our judging panel was asked to select its favourite essay responses to share with YLJ readers.

## Top essay responses

**Odette Shenfield**, *Australian National University, second year law*

“Martin Luther King said: ‘Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere’. Unfortunately, the trend in Australia seems to be that justice is not only threatened by isolated incidents of injustice, but that injustice is becoming more prevalent, and justice threatened by the institutions in place to protect it. Reforms to Victoria Legal Aid (VLA) guidelines for assistance have become increasingly stringent, and have been criticised by the LIV as denying justice. One of the many recent cuts limits adults involved in criminal matters to representation only when facing “actual imprisonment”. It is clear that the absence of a professional lawyer threatens meaningful justice. There are many factors behind recent cuts in Victoria, including: the reduction in funding from the Commonwealth, the Premier’s “tough on crime” policies that were not supplemented with increased funding, the allocation of resources within VLA, and, notably, the false economy of previous cuts. The false economy of cuts ignores the calculation PricewaterhouseCoopers made that \$1 spent on legal aid saves \$1.68. Extra costs include more appeals and bail applications, time wasted due to self-represented litigants and increased incarceration. Diminished funding therefore results in less funding available for remaining representation, creating a perpetual cycle of cutbacks, threatening justice everywhere.”

**Sarah Henderson**, *Monash University, third year law*

“In his address to the National Judicial College of Australia Conference, Justice Weinberg discerns ‘Access to justice means both the ability to ascertain what the law is as well as the ability to make use of it’. In a similar vein, unmet legal need spurs mutually from a lack of understanding of legal rights, and systemic impediments to fairness, efficiency and legal support in Australia’s justice system. While the Australian system continues to grapple with unreasonable delay, unfair access to legal services and poor legal-literacy levels, access to justice is necessarily unattainable for many with a perceived legal need, and even more so for those unaware of their legal rights. Indeed, current legal assistance schemes attract only enough funding to assist the very poorest in society, while a large middle-band remains ineligible. In order to overcome the unfair gap in legal support services, inhibiting middle-income earners from accessing justice, government funding must prioritise legal aid and community justice services. Further, public legal education programs are necessary to address the unmet legal need which occurs as a consequence of the public’s inability to perceive the true scope of their legal rights and needs.”

## Social media: A voice for access to justice

Beyond the Facebook competition, social media was integrated into the conference in every possible avenue. Along with the 350 delegates, an international audience of thousands joined the conference with an innovative real time Twitter stream. The prevailing theme for this year’s Access to Justice Conference was “communicating justice”. What better channel to facilitate this communication than social media and what better voice to spread that message than the law students of today, who are the future of the legal profession. ■

**NICOLA WESTON** is the LIV social media coordinator.

