

# Students take legal look at life, death

Essay competition asks how they would improve the law in this area

By IAN POH

CHANGE the term "culpable homicide" to "manslaughter" and relook its relation to "murder".

Separate the different degrees of homicide into altogether different offences, and add American concepts like "extreme indifference" to the mental element of murder.

These were some of the suggestions from local law students that could eventually find their way into Singapore criminal laws.

The ideas were found in entries submitted for the second Law Reform Essay Competition organised by the Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC) in collaboration with Singapore's two law schools.

Presenting prizes to the winners yesterday, Attorney-General Steven Chong said that feasible proposals would be compiled and sent to the relevant ministries for consideration.

He praised participants from the Singapore Management University (SMU) and National University of Singapore (NUS) for their "meaningful contribution" to an area of law that is "live".

Changes to the Penal Code and Misuse of Drugs Act, which kicked in this year, gave judges the option of imposing life imprisonment instead of the gallows in certain circumstances - for murderers who did not have the intention of killing their victims, or drug couriers who are mentally ill or have helped the authorities.

To date, three convicted murderers and one drug courier have had their lives spared.

Students were asked to submit essays individually or in teams of two on how to improve an area of law that involves life and death.

This comprised the legal definitions of culpable homicide and murder in Singapore's Penal Code.

The objective of the competition was to raise awareness and interest in law reform work.

Ms Dierdre Grace Morgan, a fourth-year SMU student, said that taking part had taught her a lot about an "unfamiliar" area of law.

The 23-year-old's suggestion - that homicide could be viewed as involving different wrongs, instead of different degrees of the same wrong - won first prize, including \$1,500 and a four-week internship with the AGC's Legislation and Law Reform Division.

Ms Morgan, who also took part in last year's competition, said: "Law reform is interesting because it's about how the law affects society, and gaps in the rules can be plugged to better fulfil policy objectives."

Ms Rachel Chin, 22, a fourth-year SMU student, and Mr Jonathan Muk, 24, who recently graduated from the same university, appreciated the chance to take part.

Their suggestion to rename the concept of culpable homicide and tweak its relationship with the idea of murder took third prize, \$500 and the same internship stint.

Ms Chin said: "It is quite different to think about law reform than studying cases in class.

"Law reform is about what the law should be, rather than what it is."

[pohian@sph.com.sg](mailto:pohian@sph.com.sg)