

PILA Pro Bono Survey 2014

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Introduction

One of the most remarkable developments in the practice of law over the past number of years has been the significant expansion of pro bono around the globe, not least in Ireland where PILA has been actively promoting it since 2009.

Across Ireland lawyers volunteer their time to pro bono work that gives back to their communities and improves access to justice for those who cannot afford it. In 2014, we asked solicitors, barristers and law students to participate in PILA's first national pro bono survey to provide insight into how much pro bono is happening around the country, while identifying factors that encourage or discourage pro bono service.

The survey specifically looks at the experience of individuals and therefore does not directly explore important questions around institutionalisation of pro bono, structured approaches to pro bono delivery or indeed the complex issue of how best to address the vast unmet legal need in Ireland.

The survey drew 464 responses in total from all but one county in Ireland; although PILA does recognise that the results are only able to offer a glimpse into some pro bono themes. The survey results are merely the start of an interesting conversation rather than authoritative data on national trends. This report does, however, reflect the legal profession's longstanding and ongoing commitment to pro bono legal services as a core value. We hope it will provide a stimulus for further discussion on current and future directions, and perhaps provide a yardstick by which to measure pro bono progress in Ireland.

What is pro bono?

For the purposes of this survey, PILA defined pro bono as the provision of legal services:

1. free of charge, and without expectation of a fee;
2. in the public interest;
3. for individuals, or for charitable and other non-profit making organisations;
4. who cannot afford to pay and/or where the legal need is unmet.

Healthy debate is not uncommon when it comes to the definition of pro bono, but it is generally accepted that pro bono legal services should primarily benefit poor or marginalised individuals or communities, and the organisations working with them, whose needs would be otherwise unmet.

Under this definition, in addition to the provision of regular legal services, pro bono may include such activities as the provision of free legal advice in a clinic, legal research for a charity, or legal training for civil society organisations and their communities.

Pro bono does not include legal services at a reduced rate or 'no foal, no fee' arrangements. During the survey some queried the exclusion of 'no foal, no fee' and while it has its place and its merits, it is something different to pro bono. Pro bono does not include the provision of free legal services to, for instance, friends, family or existing clients who can afford them. It also does not include time spent sitting on the Board of a charity.

Key Findings

- ❖ **The Appetite:** The survey reveals encouraging levels of pro bono work across Ireland, with almost three-quarters of practitioners engaging in pro bono during their career and 38% doing so on a regular basis. Of the lawyers who have never taken on pro bono work, 65% would like to in the future.
- ❖ **The Motivation:** While there is certainly evidence that pro bono is good for business and skills development, most lawyers are motivated to take on pro bono work because they feel it is their professional responsibility and it is work they find rewarding. Few practitioners do not see the value of pro bono or believe it may be detrimental to the profession by taking paid work from other law firms or colleagues.
- ❖ **The Obstacles:** Time constraints are the biggest obstacle for lawyers who usually volunteer their legal skills, but being too busy is not the primary reason why practitioners who are interested in taking on pro bono work have not done so to date. Instead the difficulty in identifying such work is seen as the biggest barrier – especially for junior lawyers – therefore emphasis needs to be on opportunity development through professionalisation of pro bono delivery.
- ❖ **The Leadership:** Senior practitioners, particularly partners in law firms and Senior Counsel, take on the most pro bono work and do it most regularly which shows promise in terms of ingraining pro bono culture. However, structures need to be put in place to harness visible leadership from the top and assist in channelling frequent pro bono work to more junior practitioners.
- ❖ **The Students:** Almost two-thirds of law students have engaged in pro bono over the course of their studies, largely through unpaid internships or placements. A significant majority (91%) of students feel it is important for law firms to use their resources to give back to the community and will look to be given the opportunity to take on pro bono throughout their career (86%).
- ❖ **The Concerns:** While responses to the survey were largely positive, some practical and realistic concerns were highlighted. Respondents stressed the importance of real pro bono work that is valued and effective, and not merely for 'optics'. Pro bono is only one way of addressing access to justice, and not the complete answer. The value of legal services must not be undermined, and coordination must be effective in ensuring pro bono is addressing solely unmet legal need.
- ❖ **The Future:** The survey reflects an admirable commitment to pro bono work across the legal profession in Ireland. The focus now must be on honing the quality and impact of pro bono services, while providing the chance for more practitioners to contribute and to contribute regularly.

Who is doing pro bono and why?

The survey sought responses from the broad spectrum of legal life in Ireland, with 48% of respondents being solicitors, 33% barristers and 19% law students. This report will analyse each of these groups individually.

Solicitors

1. Who responded to the survey?

Solicitors made up almost half of all responses to the survey. Of the respondents, 40% work in law firms with 250+ lawyers, being the five largest firms in Ireland. Sole practitioners represented 12% of respondents. One quarter of the surveys were from outside Dublin, most being solicitors from 2-10 lawyer practices (60%), followed by sole practitioners (26%) and solicitors from 11-50 lawyer practices (14%).

The majority of responses (23%) were received from private practitioners with between 1-3 years post-qualification experience (PQE) and those with 4-10 years PQE (21%). Some 11% of were at partnership level and those at trainee level amounted to 13%. Almost 5% of responses came from in-house counsel. Those identifying themselves as 'Other' primarily work as academics or in legal education.

Figure 1.1:
Private Practitioners - Firm Size

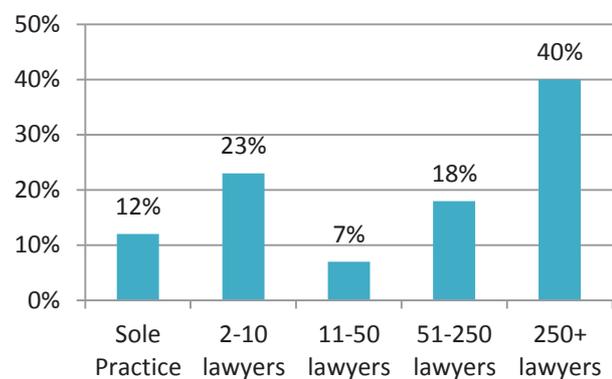
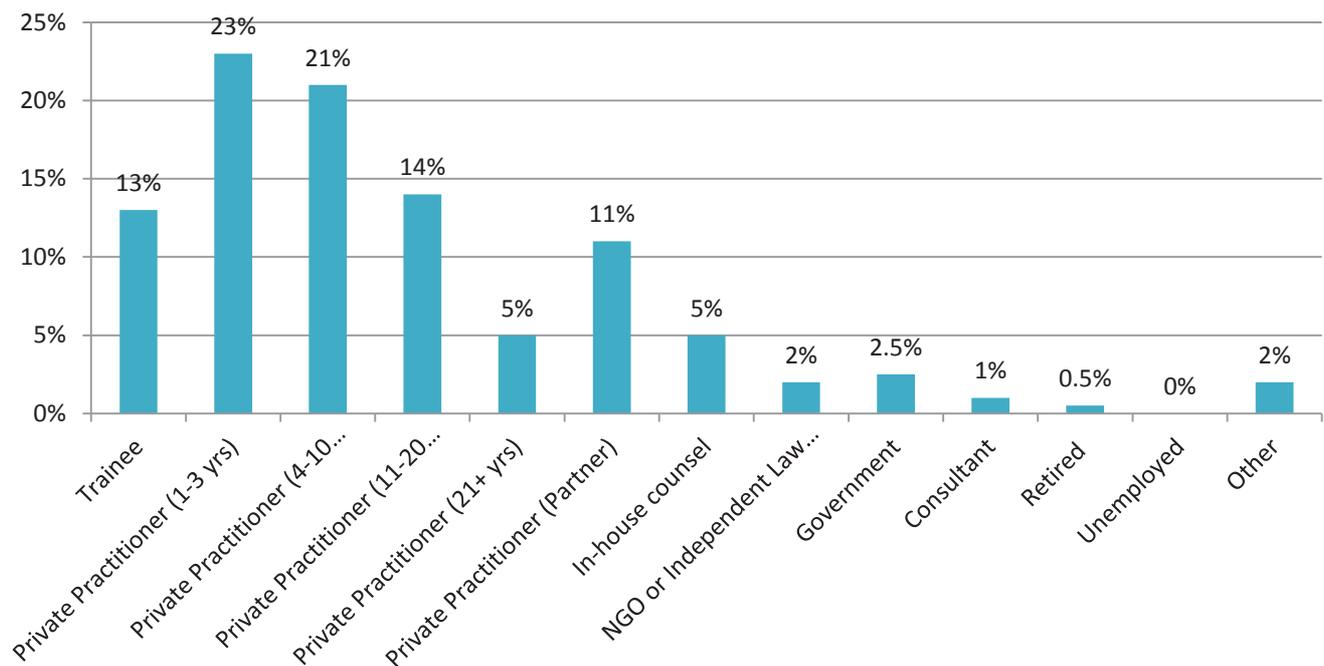


Figure 1.2: Solicitors



2. Who is doing pro bono?

According to the survey, 74% of solicitors or those training to be a solicitor have undertaken pro bono work at some point during their career. While 35% report that they do pro bono on a regular basis, a further 39% have done so in the past. These figures are reflected across Ireland.

Those most frequently engaging in pro bono come from smaller firms with 45% of lawyers in both sole and 2-10 lawyer practices, and 58% of those in 11-50 lawyer practices, regularly taking on pro bono work. Half of solicitors working in-house reported regular pro bono, although the number of such respondents was relatively low.

The survey also found that solicitors at partnership level or with more than twenty years experience – irrespective of the size of the firm – are more likely to engage in pro bono on a regular basis.

Figure 1.3: Do you, or have you previously engaged in pro bono work?

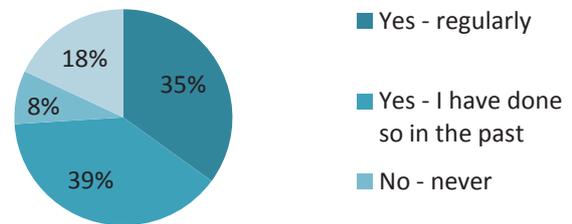


Figure 1.4: Do you, or have you previously engage in pro bono work?

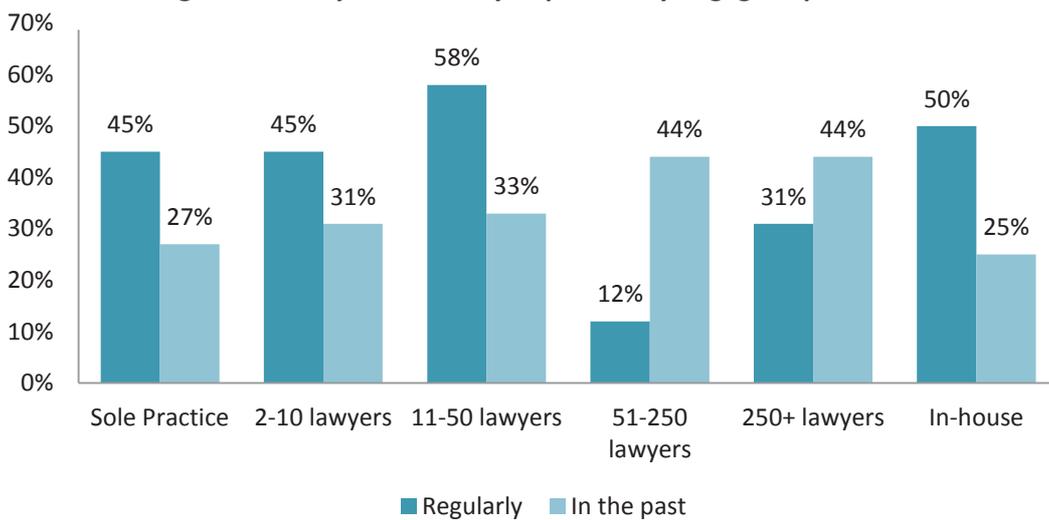
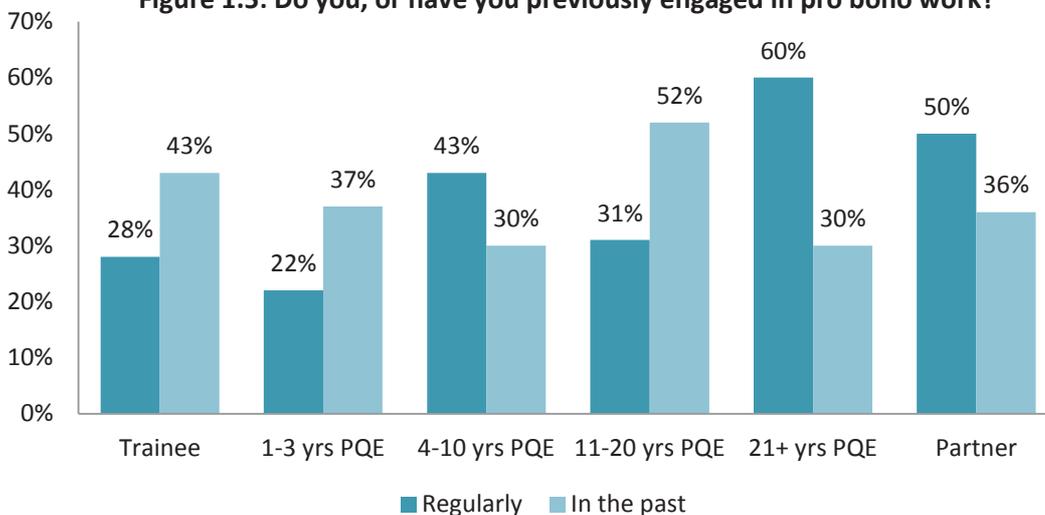


Figure 1.5: Do you, or have you previously engaged in pro bono work?



3. How much pro bono work are solicitors doing?

The solicitors who have previously taken on pro bono were asked how many pro bono hours they have provided in the previous 12 months. Just over a quarter reported to 0-5 hours, with the majority (34%) completing 6-20 hours.

The highest proportion of those doing 50+ hours pro bono come from small or medium-sized law firms (2-50 lawyers). Lawyers at partnership level claim the most pro bono hours, with 21% doing 100+ in the last year. This may be due to increased potential for requests through established contacts, and the critical role for partners in the supervision of pro bono work.

Figure 1.6: Approximately how many hours of pro bono assistance have you provided in the last 12 months?

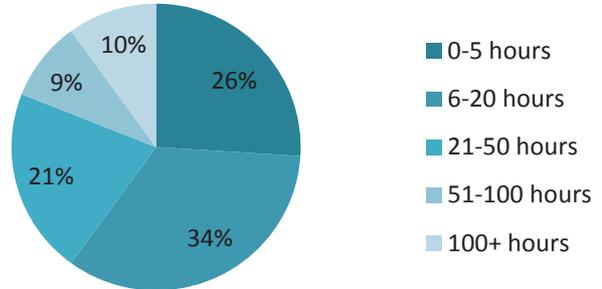


Figure 1.7: Approximately how many hours of pro bono assistance have you provided in the last 12 months?

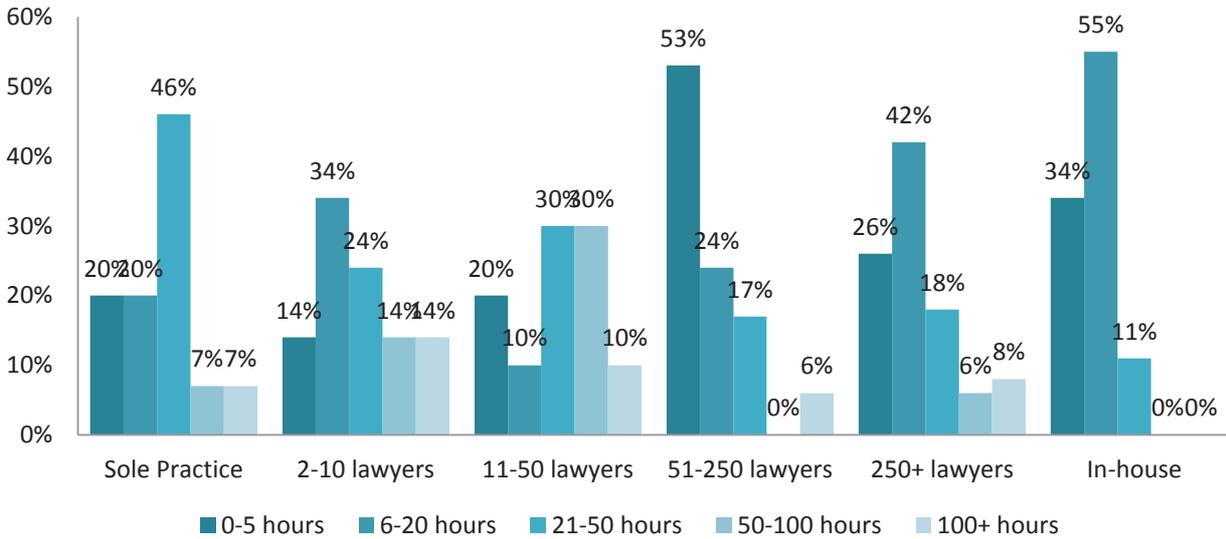
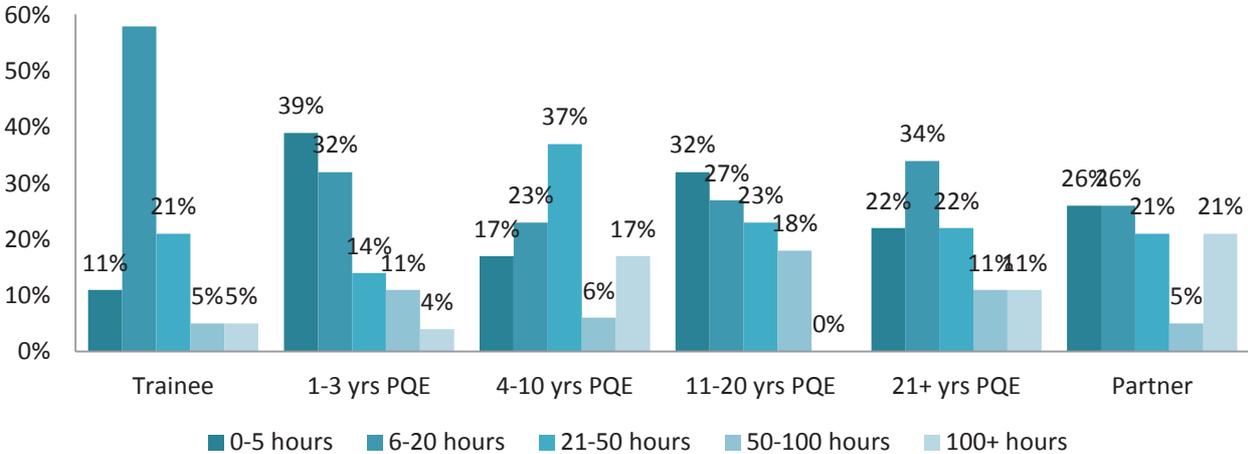


Figure 1.8: Approximately how many hours of pro bono assistance have you provided in the last 12 months?

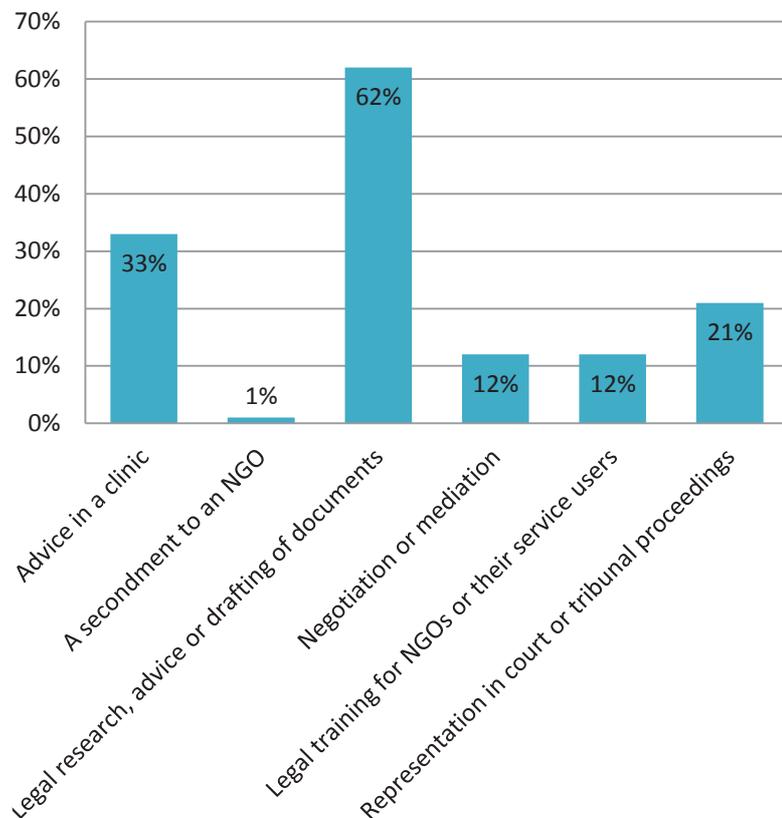


4. What kind of pro bono work are solicitors doing?

The survey found that the majority of pro bono work falls into the category of advice, drafting or research, with 62% of solicitors taking on such general pro bono legal assistance across all firms.

However, there appears to be a clear link between increasing firm size and decreasing involvement in free legal advice clinics and litigious work. Almost half of sole practitioners report to have volunteered in, or run, a free legal advice clinic compared with 12% in firms with 250+ lawyers. This may be attributed to the very nature of the work of a general practitioner or to greater autonomy when working in a smaller practice, and conversely the opportunity for lawyers in larger firms to participate in other ways through formal pro bono programmes.

Figure 1.9: What type of pro bono assistance have you provided?



The survey also found pro bono court or tribunal work to be comparatively low, with the involvement of one-fifth of solicitors surveyed. Full case representation can prove costly and time intensive for a law firm, with significant financial implications for a plaintiff should they lose. Again a divergence can be seen with 40% of sole practitioners having engaged in pro bono representation, while 11% of lawyers in law firms with 250+ lawyers have taken on pro bono litigation. For larger law firms, despite the growing number of formal pro bono programmes, accessing marginalised or disadvantaged individuals can prove difficult.

5. Where do solicitors source their pro bono work?

Amongst respondents, 41% indicated that their pro bono is undertaken as part of a formal pro bono programme within their place of work, while 43% do pro bono in their own personal capacity and 16% doing both. For the largest law firms the substantial majority (72%) of pro bono is carried out solely as part of a formal pro bono programme, with 9% volunteering their skills outside of work schemes. By comparison, of those working in law firms with 51-250 lawyers, 47% participate in pro bono as part of a formal programme, 41% on their own time and 12% are doing both. Conversely, the survey found that 7% of sole practitioners engage in pro bono as part of a formal pro bono programme within their firm, 80% do so in a personal capacity and 13% report doing both. This, perhaps, reflects a longstanding tradition of pro bono as part of daily practice within small firms, who may consider pro bono work a personal commitment rather than something quite as structured or proactive. One third of in-house lawyers participate in pro bono as part of a formal pro bono programme, representing a growing pro bono culture within corporates.

The source of pro bono work is predominantly through direct requests from individuals (38%), requests from existing or past clients (31%) and through fellow employees (18%). Just under a quarter report that their pro bono work comes from NGOs or Independent Law Centres such as volunteering in a FLAC clinic, with 18% coming from PILA and 3% from the Bar Council’s Voluntary Assistance Scheme.

6. Attitudes to pro bono

While pro bono is a way in which firms can give back to their communities and may form part of a wider ‘corporate social responsibility’ programme, for many lawyers it is more than that; it is gratifying work and the chance to make a difference. Some 76% of solicitors surveyed take on pro bono work simply because they enjoy it and find it personally rewarding. For 65% of those surveyed, it is their professional responsibility as a lawyer, while 52% feel it aligns with core values of fairness and justice. Few are motivated by pro bono potentially being good for business (17%) or leading to paid work (10%), although 42% express pride in working somewhere that supports pro bono work. A very small percentage see no value in pro bono (0.5%) or perceive it to take business from other solicitors (0.5%).

Figure 1.10: Which of the following indicate your personal attitude to pro bono?



With 35% identifying pro bono as a way of developing professional experience and skills, 51% have found it has improved their ability to provide clear advice to clients, 49% report that it has built their confidence as a lawyer and 46% see it as having an important impact on client interview skills and their ability to take

instructions. Some respondents (15%) reported no development of the skills listed in the survey, although none of these were trainees and only 7% were newly qualified solicitors showing that pro bono is a valuable learning tool in the early stages of a practitioner's career.

The biggest obstacle to pro bono was overwhelmingly seen as time, with 74% of solicitors surveyed stating they are often too busy to take on pro bono work. Other significant barriers are pro bono not being taken into account as part of fee targets or billable hours (28%) and pro bono not being rewarded in performance and salary reviews or bonus assessments (18%). Fee targets are of greater concern to lawyers in larger practices, where 40% of respondents in firms with 250+ lawyers and 47% of those with 51-250 lawyers highlighted this as a significant obstacle. Of the respondents, 47% of sole practitioners find cost to be an impediment as they may not always be able to afford to take on pro bono; a figure that dropped to 10% of respondents from law firms with 2-10 solicitors. One respondent stated, 'I make sure there are no obstacles', while some suggested that pro bono clients 'can be extremely demanding'. Another survey response highlighted 'the more support that pro bono work gets from top levels of management, the more likely lower levels are to get involved. In particular, management need to recognise it as another facet of the job and not simply a distraction from "real" client work'.

When asked for examples of pro bono success stories or final comments on pro bono, one solicitor simply stated 'I think pro bono is part of why I became a lawyer'. Although it was emphasised that 'pro bono is not the complete answer', positives included that 'pro bono work opens a lawyer's eyes to real hardship and injustices people endure as the result of the financial barrier to advisers' and that 'it represents an opportunity to give something back at no particular cost other than time (which is an extremely valuable commodity!)'. One solicitor mentioned 'acting for a successful applicant for refugee status [as] undoubtedly the most fulfilling matter I have worked on. Corporate lawyers don't usually involve themselves in gritty, life changing cases, and it was a privilege to be involved. It also brought out the very best in a very disparate team.' The flip side is that 'many small firms would love to engage in public interest litigation but there must be a business model'. Another small firm suggested that 'pro bono work should be encouraged by the Law Society and recognised as a valuable part of the profession's work profile. The public should be made aware of this side of our profession – we are so frequently knocked, our contributions should be acknowledged and promoted.'

7. Why do solicitors not engage in pro bono?

As seen in Section 2, 26% of solicitors surveyed have never engaged in pro bono although 70% would like to. While time constraints were seen as the biggest obstacle by those who have previously undertaken pro bono, only 32% cited it as a reason for not having taken on pro bono to date. Most identified not hearing about pro bono opportunities in their place of work as being the greatest barrier (38%), which was followed by 36% who feel they do not have sufficient skills or expertise in the practice areas needed. Only 6% of those surveyed specified that pro bono does not personally interest them, while 16% chose to volunteer their time in other ways. Almost 2% believe that pro bono has the potential to take paid work away from other law firms.

Even for those who have not done pro bono to date, some benefits highlighted by those surveyed were that it may give practitioners a new perspective on their role as a lawyer (75%), it may be personally rewarding (72%) and it is something that lawyers and firms can be proud of (70%). One respondent felt that 'pro bono opportunities are a very valuable thing to provide to trainee solicitors to shape how they think about the profession and their wider civic responsibility.'

Figure 1.11: Do you, or have you previously engaged in pro bono work?

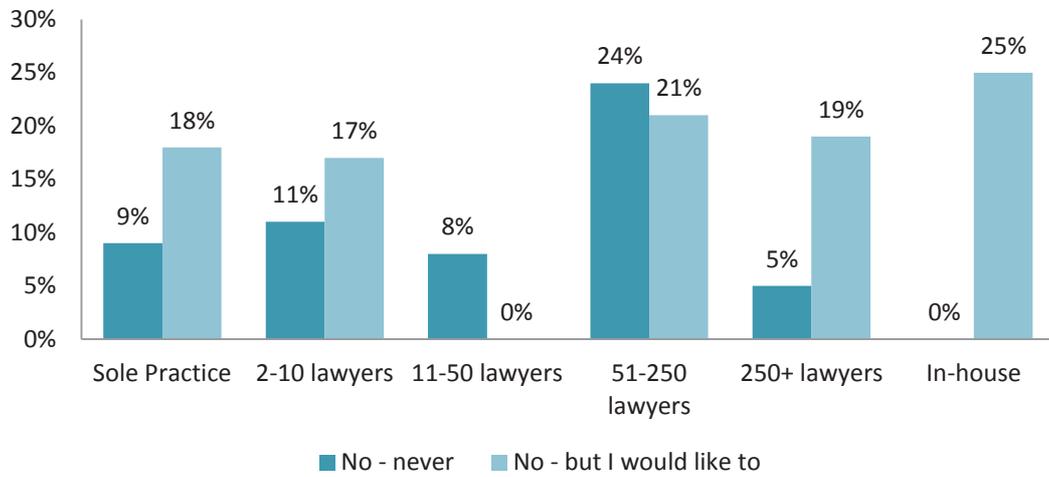
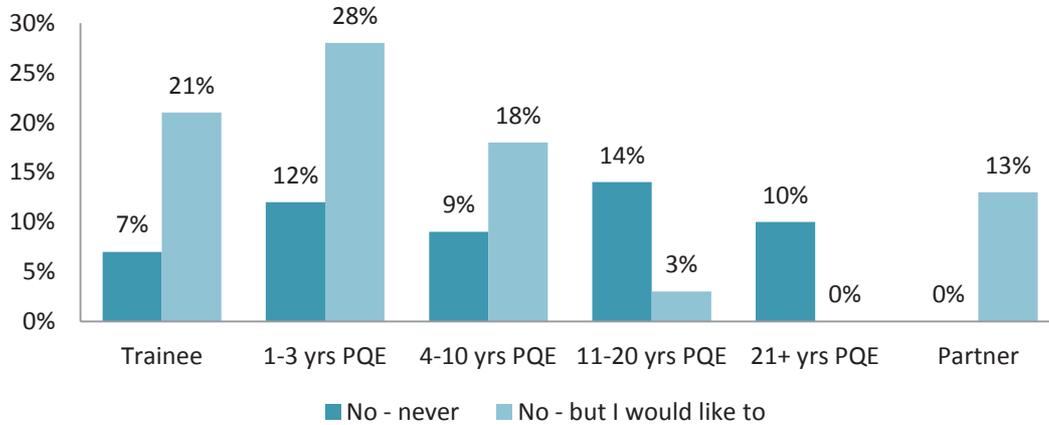


Figure 1.12: Do you, or have you previously engaged in pro bono work?

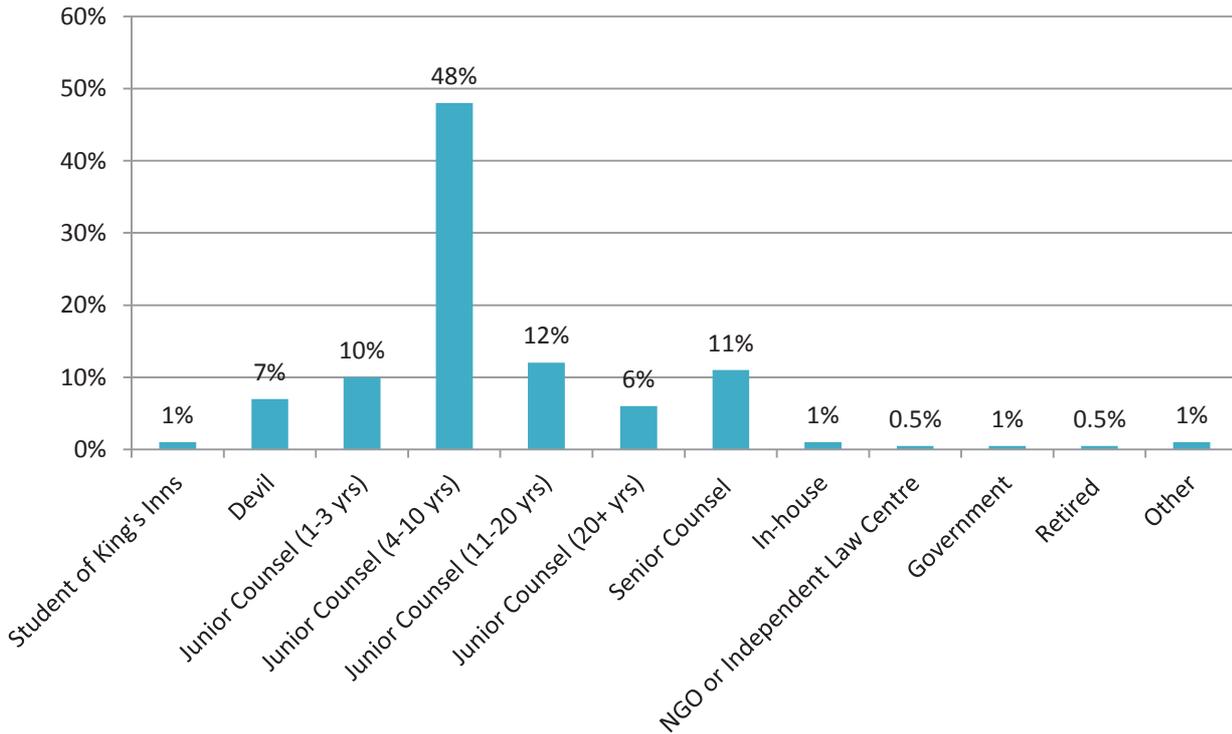


Barristers

1. Who responded to the survey?

A third of respondents to the survey were barristers, with almost half of the responses received from Junior Counsel with 4-10 years post-qualification experience (PQE). Senior Counsel made up 11% of respondents, while 7% were Devils (trainee barristers). Students of King’s Inns, in-house counsel and government lawyers respectively made up 1% of responses. Most respondents (95%) practice in Dublin, with 25% also working outside of the capital.

Figure 2.1: Barristers



2. Who is doing pro bono?

Virtually on par with solicitors, the survey found that 72% of barristers or those training to be barrister have previously engaged in pro bono work. Some 41% are doing pro bono on a regular basis and 31% have done so in the past.

Across all but one of the experience brackets surveyed, more barristers are volunteering their skills regularly than have done so in the past. Senior Counsel report the highest proportion of pro bono, with 50% giving their time frequently.

Figure 2.2: Do you, or have you previously engaged in pro bono work?

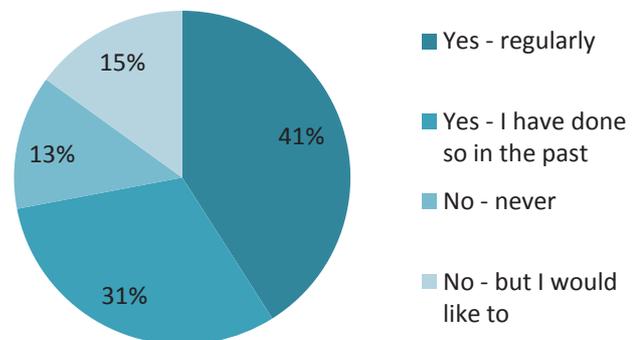
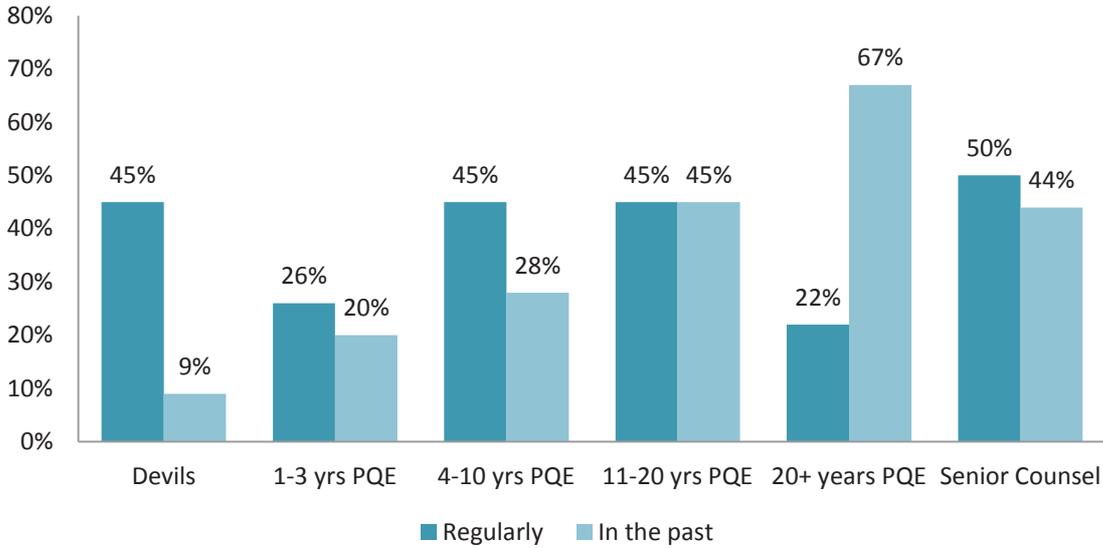


Figure 2.3: Do you, or have you previously engaged in pro bono work?



3. How much pro bono are barristers doing?

Over the past 12 months, the majority of barristers (30%) have conducted 21-50 hours pro bono, although almost one-fifth reported to 51-100 hours.

Similar to solicitors, it is senior practitioners who dedicate the most time to pro bono with 21% of Senior Counsel counting 100+ pro bono hours in the previous year.

Figure 2.4: Approximately how many hours pro bono assistance have you provided in the last 12 months?

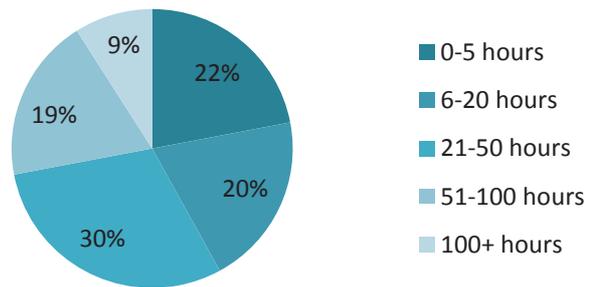
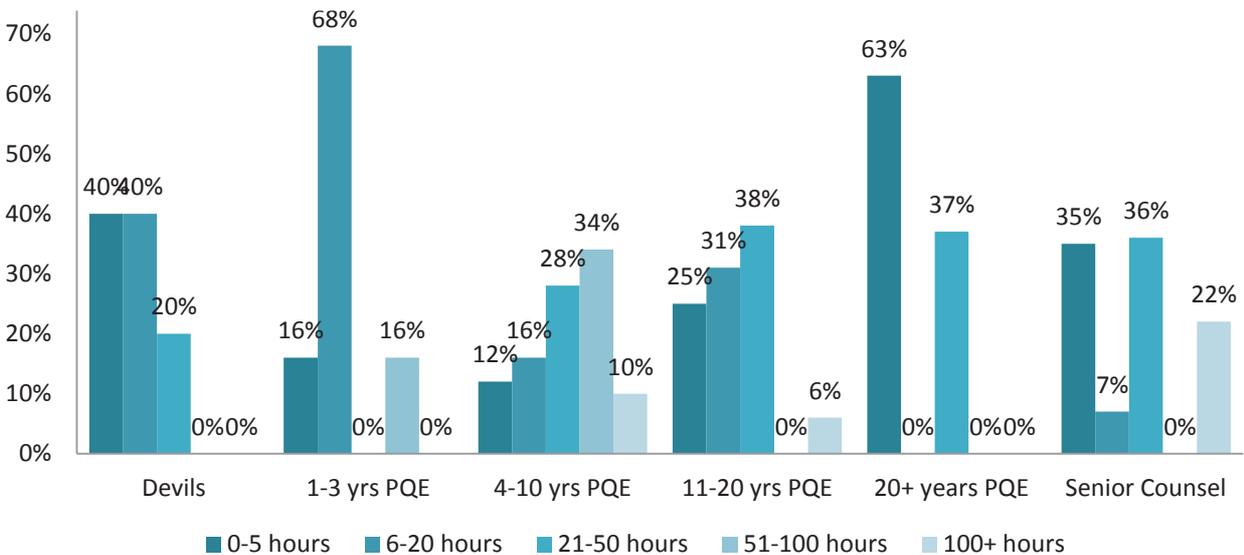


Figure 2.5: Approximately how many hours pro bono assistance have you provided in the last 12 months?



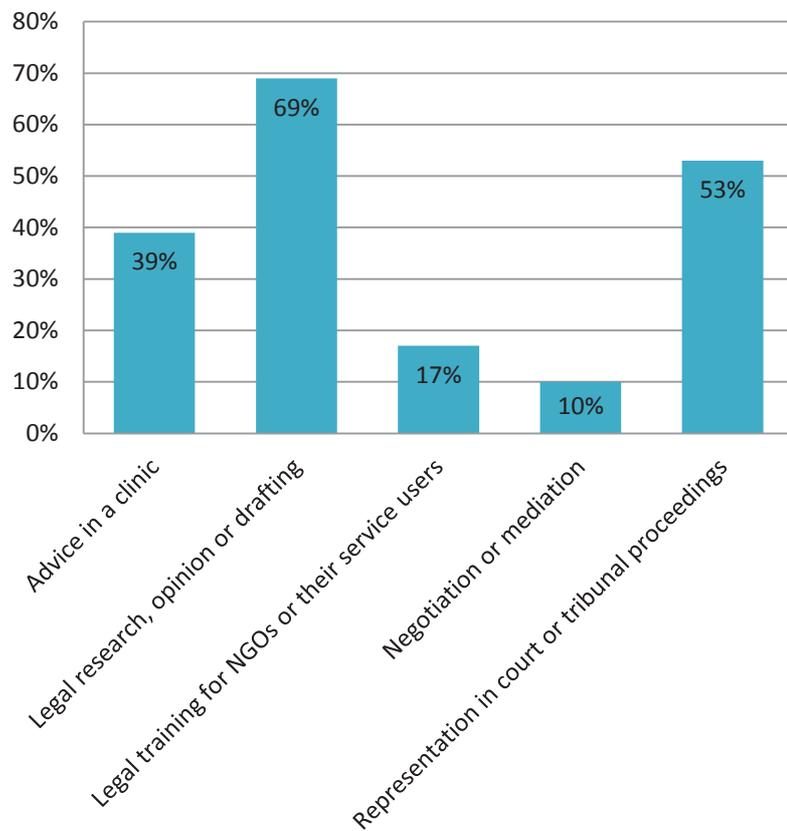
4. What kind of pro bono work are barristers doing?

The type of pro bono offered by barristers does not differ greatly from that of solicitors, with the vast majority (69%) of barristers engaged in pro bono undertaking general legal research, opinions or drafting. Unsurprisingly, the survey found far greater (53%) Bar participation in pro bono court or tribunal representation.

Free legal advice in a clinic is the only pro bono work reported by Devils answering the survey. This remains high (80%) in barristers in the first years of practice, although half also take on general pro bono advice and research and 16% are involved in pro bono representation. This may indicate a lack of opportunity for those training to be a barrister, or more likely reflects the role of a Devil where all work is done without fee and therefore is not distinguished. Pro bono clinic figures fall to zero for those over 20 years at the Bar and Senior Counsel. Those most likely

(69%) to take on pro bono litigation are barristers with 11-20 PQE.

Figure 2.6: What type of pro bono assistance have you provided?



5. Where do barristers source their pro bono work?

Most respondents (46%) are referred pro bono work by fellow barristers or solicitors, which corresponds with the fact that barristers are less likely to be approached by individuals – although a source of pro bono for 22% of those surveyed – and more reliant on their relationship with solicitors. NGOs and Independent Law Centres are a significant source of pro bono for barristers (43%), followed by family or friends (22%), the Bar Council’s Voluntary Assistance Scheme (21%) and PILA (19%).

6. Attitudes to pro bono

The predominant motivation for taking on pro bono amongst barristers surveyed is the belief that it is the professional responsibility of a lawyer (78%), followed by it being personally rewarding (60%) and the important impact it makes on access to justice and unmet legal need (59%). Again, career incentives (14%) and the potential for paid work (15%) feature low, with no barristers of the view that pro bono has no value and 1% believing it may have a negative impact on the profession by taking paid work from colleagues.

The greatest benefit to skills development is seen in providing clear advice to clients (48%), increased confidence as a lawyer (38%) and legal research and analysis (35%); all Devils report improvement in each of these areas.

Figure 2.7: Which of the following indicate your personal attitude to pro bono?



Of the barristers surveyed, 52% report that time is the biggest factor impeding pro bono practice especially, as one respondent points out, ‘practice at the Bar where demands on time can be unpredictable’. Some 34% of barristers also highlight that they may not be able to afford to take on pro bono as an obstacle, along with 15% who may not hear about pro bono opportunities or perceive that they do not have sufficient skills. One survey stated that pro bono “is exhausting and sometimes frustrating, with little or no reward”.

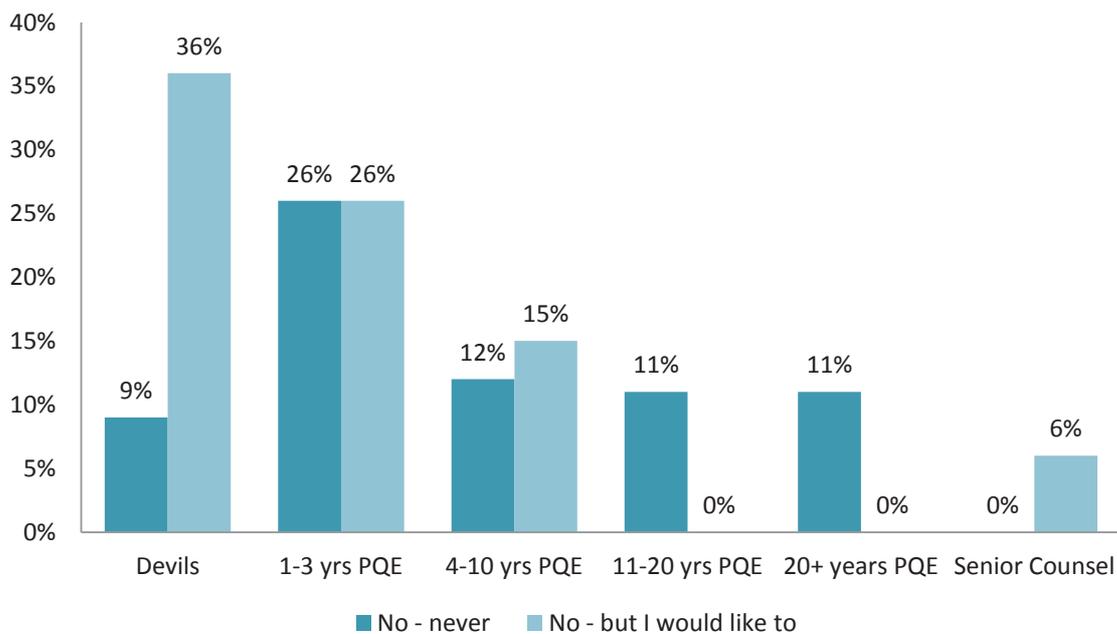
General comments on pro bono from barristers were largely positive. One account was that ‘I always say the only people I don’t meet in my line of work are the people who can’t afford my services, often those are the ones who need it most. We’ve been given the privilege of education, it’s our duty to give something back to society without seeking reward’. Another respondent mentioned that ‘I regularly avail my services for free – sometimes the people are undeserving or are simply looking for a second opinion. Unless these characters are weeded out, those who actually have ‘unmet need’ will go unseen and the whole process will be ineffective. Even in a recession, lawyers need to value their services appropriately. If

we cannot reach the correct people who truly require pro bono work to be undertaken on their behalf, the provision of services shall, unfortunately, come to an end.’ One respondent simply put it, ‘to be honest, every time someone leaves a clinic with their burden a little lighter, that’s a success story’.

7. Why do barristers not engage in pro bono?

Of barristers who took part in the survey, 28% reported to not having previously engaged in pro bono work, with more than half suggesting it is something they would like to do in the future. The biggest obstacle for those without a history of pro bono is the difficulty in identifying such work (40%), followed by not hearing about pro bono opportunities (35%) and being too busy (32%). Some 5% see no value in pro bono, while 10% choose to volunteer their time in other ways. Another 5% believe it to take paid work from fellow colleagues, as put by one respondent, “this idea that legal advice should be provided for free undermines the value of legal advice generally and robs people of paying work to the detriment of the profession as a whole”.

Figure 2.8: Do you, or have you previously engaged in pro bono work?



Law Students

1. Who responded to the survey?

Survey responses primarily were received from undergrads (60%) and recent graduates (20%), particularly from Trinity College Dublin (47%), University College Dublin (11%) and University College Cork (11%). Of those surveyed 50% plan to continue their studies, 37% hope to qualify as a solicitor, 32% hope to qualify as a barrister and 19% are looking to go into academia. A further 19% are preparing to pursue a career outside of law, while 13% are unsure of their career plans.

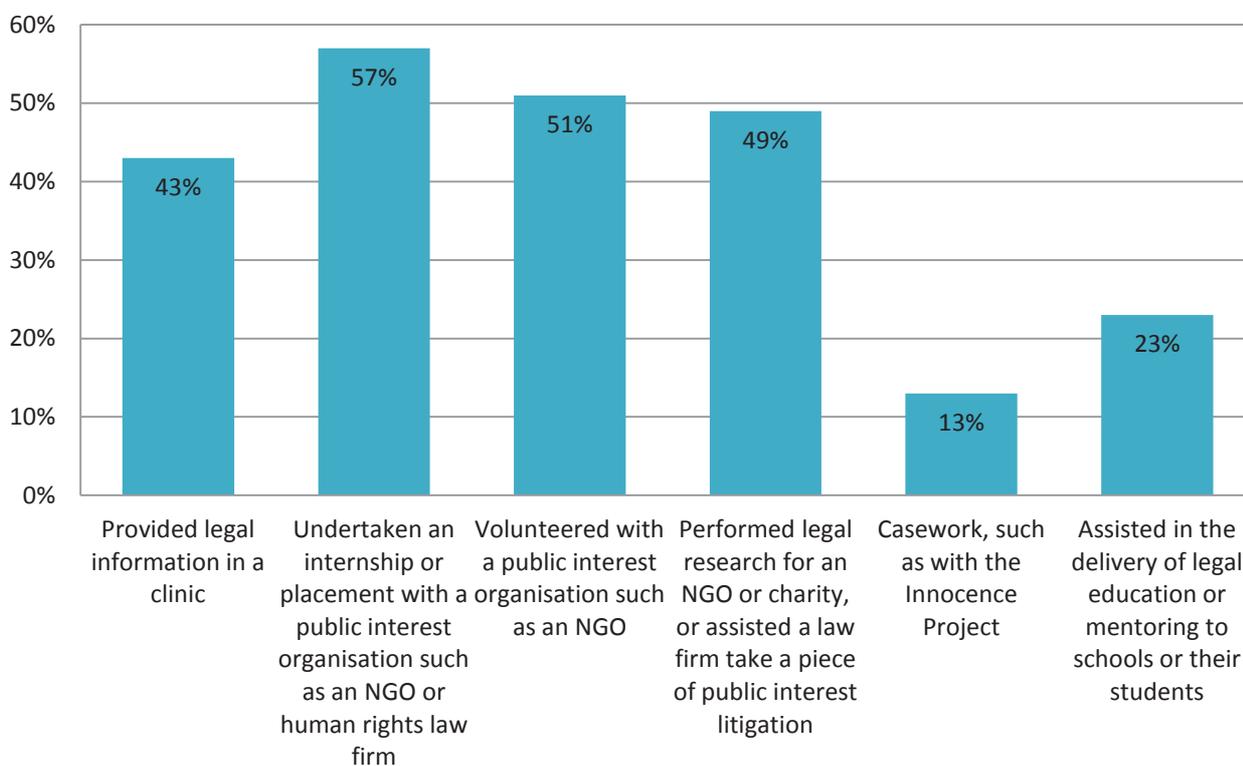
2. What kind of pro bono are students doing?

For the purposes of the survey, student pro bono was defined somewhat differently as being where students, without payment or reward, provide or assist in the provision of legal services that enhance access to justice for low income and disadvantaged people, or are in the public interest. Of the respondents, 63% of students reported to have done pro bono over the course of their studies.

The primary way in which students engage in pro bono is through an internship or placement with a public interest organisation (57%), followed by more ad hoc legal volunteering (51%) or research assistance (49%). Clinics, such as those run through FLAC societies or the UCD Student Legal Service, also rank highly with 43% of students surveyed involved in legal information provision. Casework is the lowest form of student pro bono at 13%.

The vast majority (66%) of pro bono is taken on in a purely personal capacity by students. Clinical legal education programmes, which seek to incorporate practical legal training at university level, account for 17% of student pro bono, with a further 17% of respondents doing both.

Figure 3.1: Since starting your studies, how have you volunteered your legal skills?



3. Attitudes to pro bono

Students surveyed believed the foremost skill developed through pro bono is legal research and analysis (84%), the provision of clear information to clients (72%), creative problem solving (60%) and confidence as a lawyer (60%). Only 2% believe that pro bono has not contributed to cultivating any of the skills listed.

Most students (86%) who plan to pursue a professional qualification hope to be given the opportunity to take on pro bono throughout their career. Pro bono is seen as the professional responsibility of all lawyers (81%) and is something for the legal profession to be proud of (73%). A strong majority (91%) feel that it is important for law firms to use their resources to give back to the community. Half believe that a strong pro bono practice is the mark of a leading firm, with 41% being more attracted to taking a traineeship with a firm that has an active pro bono practice. One survey stated that 'using my skills for good is important to me and is something I will weigh up in the decisions I make at each stage of my career'.

For the 33% of students who have so far not engaged in pro bono, the main reason is that they do not have sufficient skills or expertise (67%). Lack of information on how to identify opportunities to participate in pro bono is another significant factor (64%). Only 6% identified pro bono not being assessed as part of the curriculum, such as through clinical legal education programmes, as an obstacle. No respondent was not personally interested in engaging in pro bono, although 12% do choose to volunteer their time in other ways.

Figure 3.2: Do you feel volunteering has helped you develop any of the following skills?



Conclusion

Lawyers recognise better than most that the public interest is best served by a justice system that is accessible to all, yet see daily the ever growing challenges of accessing justice; be it the widening gap between rich and poor, the increasing complexity of the law or budget cuts that impact on the availability of legal aid. Moreover, NGOs and community organisations that have traditionally assisted those with limited means are finding their resources stretched to the limit.

The legal profession holds a unique place within the justice system and is well positioned to break down the barriers that prevent full access to justice. This survey not only reveals encouraging levels of pro bono work across Ireland, it shows significant appetite in the profession taking a leadership role in using pro bono as a vital adjunct in meeting unmet legal need. With a mere 10% of practitioners not inclined to participate in pro bono, there is an abundance of skill to be leveraged for good.

Barristers, solicitors and law students are united in a common sense of purpose when it comes to pro bono, motivated by civic duty and reciprocal reward. For the 17% of practitioners who have never engaged in pro bono but would like to, and for those who would like to do more, the emphasis needs to be on opportunity development through professionalisation of pro bono delivery.

The pro bono movement has made great strides in recent years, transforming from loosely organised activities undertaken on individual initiative to structured practices that are beginning to resemble any other client-focused practice area. This can be seen particularly in the growth of formal pro bono programmes within law firms and in-house legal teams, and the streamlining of pro bono requests to barristers through NGOs. Institutional commitment is the key to making pro bono a permanent part of legal culture and ensuring it gets to those most in need. The results indeed called for this, with responses stressing the importance of real pro bono work that is valued and effective, and not merely for optics.

A strong indicator of institutionalisation is the level of partner take-up within law firms, the argument being that a pro bono culture can only become truly ingrained if there is clear leadership from the top. Similar logic can be applied to senior barristers who have the potential to create opportunities for those coming up behind them. The survey results were certainly promising in this regard, although improved structures may assist in channelling more frequent pro bono work to junior lawyers. This will be particularly valuable for future practitioners who believe workplace support for pro bono to be very important.

Other obstacles benefit from this concept. For instance, time constraints are a major impediment to pro bono within law firms. Having the right policies and incentives in place help by ensuring lawyers are clear about when they can do pro bono so it is not pushed to the bottom of a long list of priorities. There is also a need for greater coordination between law firms and barristers, with many barristers seeing the development of such relationships as key to progressing pro bono.

While there is likely to be a natural bias towards doing pro bono work amongst respondents who take the time to complete a survey on pro bono – generating predominantly enthusiastic results – a number of practical and realistic concerns arose. Pro bono is limited in what it can do for access to justice and is not a panacea. The value of legal services must not be undermined, and coordination must be effective in ensuring pro bono is addressing solely unmet need.

In all, the survey reflects the admirable commitment to pro bono that PILA sees in its everyday work. The focus now must be on honing the quality and impact of pro bono services, while providing the chance for more practitioners to contribute and to contribute regularly.

PILA (Public Interest Law Alliance)

PILA is a public interest law network that seeks to engage the legal community and civil society in using the law to advance social change.

PILA was established in 2009 as a project of FLAC (Free Legal Advice Centres), an independent human rights organisation that promotes equal access to justice for all.

PILA aims to:

- Drive and grow a diverse alliance of people and organisations that are committed to the development of public interest law in Ireland.
- Promote the concept of pro bono in order to match the unmet legal need of civil society organisations with lawyers and law firms willing to give their services for free, thereby building the capacity of organisations to engage in public interest work.
- Mobilise emerging lawyers through clinical legal education programmes and the inclusion of a public interest law element into all levels of legal education and training.
- Conduct research on barriers to public interest litigation in Ireland, raise awareness and work to remove these barriers.

What is public interest law?

Public interest law is a way of working with the law for the advancement and protection of human rights for the benefit of marginalised and disadvantaged people.

PILA was designed to build the capacity and number of organisations engaging in public interest law work in its broadest sense; not specifically having to involve the courts, but also assisting vulnerable groups to have input into the democratic process through, for example, being involved in a process of law reform or by participating more fully in the outputs of the legislative process.

PILA Pro Bono Referral Scheme

Central to PILA's work is the Pro Bono Referral Scheme, which supports social justice non-governmental organisations (NGOs), independent law centres and community organisations in obtaining legal assistance where they do not have the resources or in-house expertise.

PILA receives and assesses requests for assistance from over 90 NGOs, filtering matters that meet our criteria and referring them on to a pro bono barrister, solicitor or law firm with suitable skills.

The Pro Bono Referral Scheme gives NGOs access to:

- Legal advice – on organisational issues or in line with policy and campaign work;
- Law reform working groups – where lawyers and NGOs come together to work to implement social change;
- Litigation support – including pre-litigation advices and casework; and
- Legal education sessions – to better equip NGO staff in navigating the law.