



Guidance notes for Transition Year Coordinators

The Gráinne O'Neill Memorial Legal Essay Competition

Overview

The Gráinne O'Neill Memorial Legal Essay Competition was initiated in 2019 by Judge Keenan Johnson, Judge of the Circuit Court, in collaboration with the Midland Solicitors' Bar Association, Michele Mellotte, Dermot Scanlon, Dr Bernadette Ní Áingléis, Peter Jones (State Solicitor), Judge Rosemary Horgan, Mark Cooney, Judge Patricia Cronin, the O'Neill family and latterly Michele O'Boyle (Past-President, Law Society of Ireland).

The competition honours the life and legacy of the late Judge Gráinne O'Neill who died in her native Athlone in 2018 following an illness, and whose memory continues to inspire, influence, and energise. Gráinne was the youngest judge in Ireland when appointed in 2014 to the District Court. In four short years, she left a rich legacy of strong, compassionate justice with a profound, empathetic regard for those struggling to make ends meet and to make good in life. Gráinne infused spaces and places with her joyful gratitude for life and her desire to make a difference to people and their lives. The Gráinne O'Neill Memorial Legal Essay Competition sets out to capture a sense of that human desire to make a real difference to young people, to their thinking and learning, and their lives.

Launching on a national level and building on the success in the Midlands

The competition had been run successfully by the Midland Solicitors' Bar Association across schools in Offaly and Westmeath. The Law Society of Ireland has now rolled out this competition at a national level. The National Grainne O'Neill Memorial Essay Competition will cover a selected theme relating to the law and invite applications from TY students across Ireland. Firstly, schools will be asked to hold their own internal selection and choose essays to submit to the county finals. Bar Associations will be invited to hold round one of judging (county final) before the chosen finalist progresses to the national round. A marking scheme has been developed to assist judging. The Law Society of Ireland will host a National Awards Ceremony in May 2026 with a presentation for first, second and third prizes.

The Competition

1. The essay competition is open to post-primary, Transition Year (TY) students (15-18 years' age group) in Ireland.
2. The objective of the legal essay competition is to foster and encourage an interest in law, its applications, practice and relevance to TY students in their day-to-day lives, learning and more broadly as young citizens and members of society. It is intended that the process will develop students' reflectiveness and encourage innovation in their thinking and their overall creativity as young citizens. Participation in the competition should be a source of joy to all involved and bring a sense of achievement for participating students and schools.

3. The essay competition requires a student to submit an essay on the title provided. The title for the 2025-2026 Gráinne O'Neill Memorial Legal Essay Competition is: **'Protecting Voices, Preventing Harm: Legal Challenges in Online Freedom of Speech.'**
4. The essay must not exceed 1,500 words excluding footnotes and listing of references.
5. The essay may be submitted in English or in Irish (as Gaeilge).
6. All essays must be accompanied by the official Declaration and must include the student's signature and date of submission. The Declaration confirms that the essay submitted is the work entirely of the student in question and reflects best efforts. An essay submitted without the Declaration will not be deemed a valid entry and will be excluded by the adjudicating panel.
7. All essays must be typed and submitted electronically to the email address provided (EssayCompetition@LawSociety.ie) The closing date for receipt of essays is: **5pm on 21 November 2025.**
8. A panel of judges with expertise in law and education will adjudicate on the entries. The judges are independent of the organisation of the competition and have no connection with any of the student entries. The decision of the adjudicating panel shall be absolute and final. There shall be no appeal against the decision of the adjudicators.

Prize-winners

1. There will be three prizes: 1st prize: Winner of the Gráinne O'Neill Perpetual Memorial Trophy (to be held for one year by the school of the winning student), a Memorial Medal and prize-winner's Certificate to be kept by the student for all time, and a cash prize for the student. 2nd prize: A cash prize and prize-winner's Certificate. 3rd prize: A cash prize and a prize-winner's Certificate.
2. A prize-winning ceremony will take place in Dublin (The Law Society, Blackhall Place) on a date to be confirmed in May 2026 to which the finalists will be invited along with their families, school Principals, TY Co-ordinators, and invited guests. Local media/press will be invited to attend.

Data Protection: The Law Society of Ireland complies fully with its legal obligations and responsibilities under Data Protection law including GDPR. The processing of all data relating to the legal essay competition will be subject to strict data protection controls and rigorously undertaken by those involved in all aspects of the organisation and adjudication processes.

Adjudicators' Marking Scheme

The regional and national judges will adhere to the following marking schemes when marking essays:

- Knowledge and understanding of the topic (30 marks)
- Analysis and arguments presented (30 marks)
- Structure of the essay, research evidence, referencing, language (20 marks)
- Overall coherence of the essay, readability, and impact (20 marks)

Key dates for your Diary

October – November 2025	Schools conduct internal competition and mark essays. Please follow the Adjudicators' Marking Scheme to mark essays.
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21 November 2025	Essays passing 65 marks will be submitted to the regional finals for judging. Schools must submit entries to EssayCompetition@LawSociety.ie no later than 21 November.
December-January 2026	Round 1 judging commences. Judges will remark and entries over 80 marks will be submitted for judging in the national competition. All adjudicators will follow the marking scheme.
January 2026	Regional winners will be submitted to the finalist adjudication panel.
February 2026	National adjudication panel will select three prize-winners.
March – May 2026	Top 30 entries will be informed and will be invited to a ceremony at the Law Society of Ireland, Blackhall Place, Dublin 7 where they will receive a highly commended certificate. Three prize winners will be announced and receive a plaque and cash prize.

Ends -

Thank you to Dr Bernadette Ní Áingléis for original design of Programme Materials.