

Enhancing Legal Education through Case-Based E-Consultation: An Empirical Study of the Faculty of Shariah and Law Legal Clinic at USIM

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary society, the Muslim community often encounters complex challenges that require resolution within the framework of the Syariah legal system. This scenario presents an invaluable opportunity for law students to engage directly with community needs through practical learning experiences. This study explores enhancing legal education by implementing case-based e-consultation at the Legal Clinic of the Faculty of Shariah and Law (FSU), Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). The primary objective is to analyse and systematise real case data from e-consultation sessions into structured learning resources for academic use. Employing document analysis, the study scrutinises materials related to the e-consultation process, providing critical insights into its practical deployment. Despite positive outcomes, challenges such as technical constraints, inconsistent case documentation, and suboptimal pedagogical structuring were observed. To address these issues, the study advocates for developing a comprehensive case database and ongoing training for faculty to support effective implementation. Ultimately, the findings endorse the integration of e-consultation as a sustainable, experiential, and community-oriented pedagogical tool, contributing significantly to advancing legal education curricula.

Keywords: E-Consultation, Legal Education, Real Legal Cases, Experiential Learning, Legal Clinic.

INTRODUCTION

In this challenging era of globalisation, the Muslim community is faced with various increasingly complex life issues, including those related to family, inheritance, divorce, child custody, and civil affairs that require solutions based on the Sharia legal framework. However, many still do not understand or do not know how to apply the Sharia legal system effectively in their daily lives (IUCEL Poster, 2021).

The Sharia legal system not only functions as a framework for legal control but also plays an important role in providing justice, social balance, and peace of mind to Muslims. Therefore, a deep understanding of this system is fundamental for the fair implementation of the law and as a foundation in building a harmonious and prosperous society (Astro Awani, 2020).

In the context of higher education, Sharia law students play an important role in spreading this understanding to the community. Through training and exposure to real cases, students can apply the knowledge learned in the classroom and directly contribute to solving the problems of the Muslim community. This is based on the principle of experiential learning, which emphasises practical and reflective engagement in the real world (IUCEL Poster, 2021).

To meet the challenges of learning in the new norm after the COVID-19 pandemic, the Faculty of Sharia and Law (FSU), Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), has introduced an innovative initiative, namely e-Consultation through the USIM Legal Clinic. This initiative began in March 2020 and allowed students to conduct legal consultation sessions online under professional lawyers, using Zoom, Facebook and YouTube (Astro Awani, 2020). This session not only helps students face real legal issues but also provides free legal services to the public in need, especially during times of crisis (Harian Metro, 2024).

Accordingly, this study was conducted to examine the implementation of e-consultation based on an approach to strengthen legal education. This study also aims to reorganise the cases handled during the email sessions to be used as systematic learning materials in course modules related to Sharia and civil law.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Legal Education and Experiential Learning

Legal education has evolved from being purely theoretical to more practical and hands-on. One of the main teaching approaches that supports this shift is Clinical Legal Education (CLE). CLE can be defined as "instruction in interpersonal skills (e.g., interviewing, counselling, negotiation) and professional ethics (the moral principles that regulate the behaviour of lawyers in the role) in the context of student fieldwork (representation of actual clients with live cases in law offices created by law schools for this purpose) under the supervision (systematic, critical analysis of student work) of a lawyer/ law teacher" (Condlin, 1983). CLE is a method where law students apply what they learn in class to real-life legal issues. They do this under the supervision of experienced lecturers or legal professionals. This process allows them to build important legal skills such as communicating with clients, preparing legal documents, thinking critically, and solving societal problems (Evans et al., 2017; Giddings, 2008).

Experiential Learning (EL), introduced by Kolb in 1984, serves as a framework to address the gap between acquiring information and its practical application. This approach emphasises learning through direct experience and assesses learners based on past experiences (Sternberg & Zhang, 2014). This approach is critical in legal education because students need to understand legal theory and be skilled in analysing case facts, communicating professionally, and solving problems ethically and practically.

At Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), this practical learning happens through the FSU Legal Aid Clinic, where students are directly involved in handling real legal consultations. Che Musa and Nawawi (2021) explain that through the clinic, students learn how the law works in practice, develop empathy, and better understand people's real-life struggles, especially those related to family and Syariah law. These experiences help students think beyond textbooks, allowing them to see how legal theory is applied daily.

The Role of Legal Clinics in Law Students' Practicum

Clinical Legal Education (CLE) generally refers to practical training in legal skills. In some jurisdictions, such as the United States, CLE provides access to justice for individuals not represented by lawyers (New York State Judicial Institute, 2005). A key motivation for establishing legal clinics was to enable law schools to take a more active role in delivering legal representation to underserved communities (Condlin, 1983; Bellow, 1983).

Bradway (1939) emphasised that Clinical Legal Education (CLE) offers students the opportunity to handle real-life cases under the supervision of legal practitioners. This experience provides insight into the actual practice of law and enhances students' essential legal skills, techniques, and intellectual discipline. The importance of CLE became even clearer during the COVID-19 pandemic, when universities could no longer operate as usual. This transition ensured continuous access to justice and allowed students to develop digital skills, which are becoming essential for modern legal professionals (Jones et al, 2021).

Similarly, Sandefur and Selbin (2009) highlighted that CLE aligns with the broader goal of strengthening the professional competencies of future legal practitioners. They noted that such programs offer a more practical and realistic learning pathway, directly supporting students' future career development. Wizner (2002) described clinical legal education as a form of educational law office, where students are expected to demonstrate practical competence while critically reflecting on the objectives of their training and how it connects to the legal theories and principles studied in textbooks.

The Concept of E-Consultation and Its Potential in Higher Education

E-consultation refers to online consultation or advisory services using communication technologies such as

Zoom, Google Meet, or social media such as Facebook and YouTube. In legal education, e-consultation opens up a new space for students to interact with the community in real situations without physical meetings. This approach has become increasingly important after the COVID-19 pandemic, when higher education institutions have had to adapt their teaching methods to digital platforms (Astro Awani, 2020).

This initiative ensures the continuity of legal clinic activities during the crisis and proves its potential as a flexible, easily accessible, and high-impact learning medium. Students can practice their communication and legal analysis skills directly and increase their awareness of social realities and community needs, in line with the principles of experiential learning (IUCEL Poster, 2021).

According to a study by Evans et al. (2017), the experience of interacting with real clients helps students build self-confidence, hone professional ethics, and develop authentic legal skills. This idea follows Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which says that students learn best through four stages: doing something, thinking about it, learning from it, and trying again in a new way. This method is called case-based or problem-based learning (PBL) in legal education. It has been shown to help students better understand legal concepts and apply them to real problems (Maharg, 2007; Murray, 2015).

In addition, e-consultation contributes to the inclusive development of higher education as students and clients from different locations can engage without geographical restrictions or high costs. This, in turn, encourages more involvement in clinical education and community service, especially among the underprivileged who need free legal advice.

Comparison of E-Consultation and Clinical Legal Education (CLE) in Other Contexts

Implementing the e-consultation model in Clinical Legal Education (CLE) in Malaysia, particularly at the FSU Legal Clinic, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), reflects an innovative approach to teaching and learning law practically. However, it is important to compare the implementation of CLE and e-consultation in other international and national contexts to assess the effectiveness and potential for improvement of the existing model.

Internationally, many universities have integrated CLE with technology-based e-consultation systems extensively. For example, through its Legal Services Centre, Harvard Law School (USA) provides a digital platform for students to conduct legal consultations under the supervision of lecturers. Students are trained to handle real cases using the online platform, emphasising ethics, communication skills, and critical thinking (Caplan, 2024). Researchers from the United States proposed that Clinical Legal Education (CLE) has roots in the 'casebook method' popularised at Harvard, which eventually evolved into non-credit 'legal dispensaries' or legal aid bureaus. These initiatives were designed to offer students practical experience in developing lawyering skills and conducting legal analysis (New York State Judicial Institute, 2005; Rowe, 1917).

Likewise, at the University of New South Wales, Australia, Kingsford Legal Centre is a community legal centre that provides free legal advice, casework, and legal education to the local community. CLE is conducted in a hybrid manner with physical and digital consultations. Kingsford Legal Centre provides legal advice on various issues, including domestic violence, credit and debt, victim compensation, criminal law, employment law, discrimination, motor vehicle accidents, and consumer-related matters (Kingsford Legal Centre, 2025). They emphasise a "student-centred learning" approach and provide a technology support system that allows students to access case documents, clients, and lecturer guidance virtually.

Meanwhile, in Malaysia, several universities such as Universiti Malaya (UM) and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) also implement CLE, Clinical Legal Education, which is an innovative and evolving approach to legal training, commonly offered through university-based law faculties, such as at Universiti Malaya. It aims to produce well-trained, socially responsible, and ethically grounded legal professionals. Using an experiential, problem-based learning model, students engage directly in fundamental client interactions or participate in simulated scenarios to reflect actual legal situations (Clinical Legal Education, n.d.).

The Literacy and Legal Aid Clinic (KLBG) at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) was officially launched

on 1 April 2013. KLBG offers services for a wide range of cases, including those heard in Civil and Syariah Courts and criminal matters. It also functions as a platform for promoting legal awareness and education among the public by conducting legal literacy programs (Literacy & Legal Aid Clinic (KLBG), n.d.).

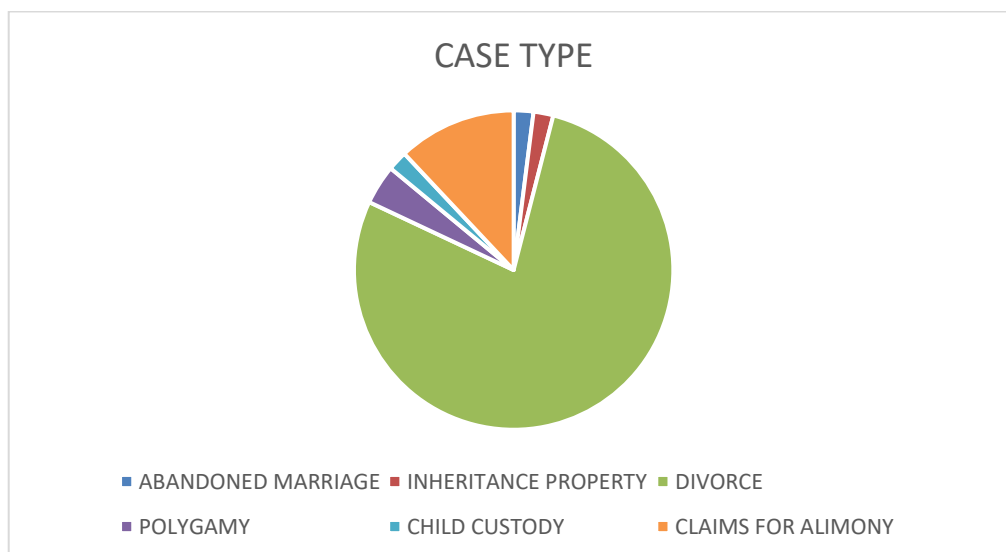
The advantages of implementing e-consultation abroad are a more stable and comprehensive system and legal policies that virtually support student involvement in real cases. However, the FSU model shows a form of local adaptation that emphasises compliance with Sharia principles and the local community's needs. Overall, this comparison shows that although the e-consultation approach at FSU is still in the development stage, it has excellent potential to grow. The implementation of CLE in other countries can be used as a reference to strengthen the aspects of training, assessment, and the provision of technology platforms to support learning.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative case study approach to examine the implementation of e-Consultation at the Legal Clinic, Faculty of Sharia and Law (FSU), Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) which was obtained through the method of Document Analysis and Case Reports, namely the analysis of Client Case Reports prepared by trainee students. These reports were analysed to assess how a case was handled and the extent of student involvement in the consultation process. According to Kirk and Miller (1986), the qualitative approach is a tradition in social science research that emphasises observation of an event in its real context and focuses on understanding phenomena through the language and terminology used by the study participants.

The data collected was analysed systematically and selected from e-consultation reports documented by students between 2020 and 2021. The selection was made based on the criteria of factual clarity, completeness of information, and relevance to the main themes of family law and Sharia. Each case was reviewed to ensure sufficient information, such as the client's background, legal issues raised, and student reflections. The cases were organised according to the main issue categories that prompted clients to seek legal assistance from the USIM Legal Clinic. Graph one shows that most of the cases handled were related to divorce, spousal and child support, and polygamy. The document analysis method was chosen because it was suitable for assessing the process of implementing e-Consultation and identifying its impact on strengthening students' skills in legal education. Furthermore, this approach helps reorganise real case content into relevant systematic learning materials. This method also aligns with the need to make learning more experiential and community-oriented, especially in Shariah education that is responsive to current social realities.

Graph 1: Case Type



FINDINGS

The data collected in Table 1 focused on 2020-2021, when digital consultation methods became increasingly relevant due to the ongoing shifts in education and legal services delivery. Through this e-consultation platform,

law students were exposed to real cases and engaged in problem-solving and client interaction under the guidance of lecturers and legal practitioners.

A total of 50 clients were involved in the study. From this sample, most clients were women, comprising 42 individuals or 84%. In contrast, only seven clients were men, representing 14%, and one case (2%) involved both a male and a female applicant. This gender distribution indicates that legal consultation services, particularly in family-related matters, are more frequently sought by women, potentially due to their greater vulnerability in marital and post-marital disputes.

Geographically, the clients who engaged in the e-consultation services came from various zones across Malaysia, demonstrating the clinic's broad reach. The central region recorded the highest cases with 22 clients, accounting for 44%. The southern zone followed with 12 clients (24%), while the northern zone reported 10 clients (20%). The eastern zone had four clients (8%), and fewer cases came from Sabah and Sarawak, with two clients (4%). These statistics indicate that while the central region had the greatest concentration of clients, the e-consultation platform effectively extended its services nationwide, making legal aid more inclusive and accessible.

The nature of legal issues presented during the e-consultations varied, but the most dominant category was divorce cases, which comprised 38% of the total cases, amounting to 76%. This significant proportion highlights the prevalence of marital breakdowns and the urgent need for accessible legal support in such matters. Other types of legal issues brought forward by clients included claims for alimony, inheritance disputes, child custody, and issues related to polygamy. These remaining categories collectively accounted for 24% of the cases handled during the e-consultation sessions. The diversity of cases reflects the Muslim community's challenges in family law matters and provides students with varied experiential learning opportunities across different legal domains.

Regarding socioeconomic status, most clients fell within the B40 and M20 income groups, with reported monthly household incomes ranging from RM1,000 to RM6,000. This reflects the financial realities of many Malaysians who struggle to afford legal representation and thus turn to free legal aid services for assistance. The availability of e-consultation allowed these individuals to seek legal advice without the burden of travel or cost, aligning with the clinic's mission to support marginalised and underrepresented communities. Furthermore, this demographic context enriched the learning experience for students, as they gained insights into the socioeconomic factors that often influence legal problems and client behaviour.

Overall, the findings show that the integration of e-consultation into legal education not only benefits clients by offering accessible legal services but also significantly enhances the quality of teaching and learning. Students can engage with real legal issues, develop critical thinking and communication skills, and understand the societal context of law in a more practical and empathetic manner.

Table 1: Clients' Cases

| Item | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---------------|-----------|----------------|
| Client | | |
| Men | 7 | 14 |
| Women | 42 | 84 |
| Man and woman | 1 | 2 |
| Zone | | |
| South | 12 | 24 |
| Middle | 22 | 44 |
| East | 4 | 8 |
| North | 10 | 20 |
| Sabah/Sarawak | 2 | 4 |

| Case type | | |
|----------------------|----|----|
| Divorce | 39 | 78 |
| Claims for alimony | 6 | 12 |
| Polygamy | 2 | 4 |
| Child custody | 1 | 2 |
| Abandoned marriage | 1 | 2 |
| Inheritance property | 1 | 2 |

DISCUSSION

The Use of Real Cases and Their Implications for Student Learning

One of the main findings of this study is the effectiveness of using real cases from e-consultation sessions as a practical (experiential) and contextual learning medium. Direct student involvement with clients in resolving real legal issues has opened up space for deeper skill development, particularly in critical thinking, legal analysis, and structured argumentation skills. The clinic follows the Clinical Legal Education (CLE) model, which aims to bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world legal practice. By handling actual client cases under the supervision of experienced legal professionals, students gained valuable practical experience that helped them apply their legal knowledge more effectively (Evans et al., 2017).

Using e-consultation allowed students to engage with real legal problems, mainly in Syariah and civil law. For example, in one of the cases analysed, students had to examine the application of a single mother who wanted to obtain custody of her child after the death of her husband. In the process, students had to understand the issues of faraid, wali, legal guardian and Syariah Court procedures. This experience directly trained students to analyse various branches of law comprehensively. This helped them build key skills such as legal analysis, clear communication, and ethical decision-making (Che Musa & Nawi, 2021).

A significant finding shown in graph two from the study was the significant % of the clients, 84% were women and 14% were men. This gender trend reflects a broader social issue, where women are often more affected by legal challenges after a marriage ends, particularly due to financial dependency or child custody conflicts (Razak et al., 2022; Harian Metro, 2024). By working on these cases, students were exposed to emotionally sensitive and ethically complex situations, which helped them develop empathy and professional maturity (Giddings, 2008).

As legal clinics increasingly resemble conventional law courses, an important discussion has arisen among clinical educators on the most effective ways for law students to gain meaningful learning through practical experience (Margaret Martin Barry et al., 2000). Compared to traditional methods such as reading cases in textbooks or simulations in lecture rooms, exposure to real cases allows students to connect theory with reality and understand how Sharia and civil law principles are applied in the context of real life in society. Overall, these findings indicate that using real cases in e-Consultations has strengthened the effectiveness of legal learning through a real-life experience-based approach and successfully built students better prepared to face the real world of the legal profession.

More Realistic and Practical Learning

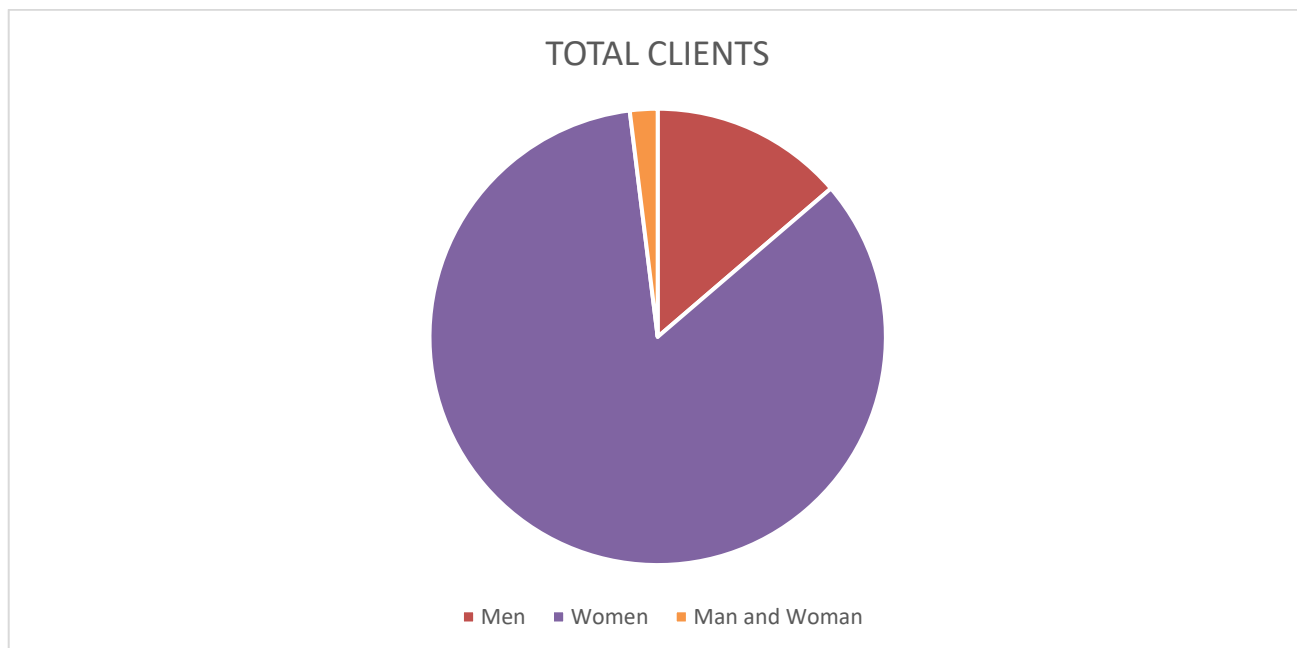
Implementing e-Consultation at the USIM Legal Clinic has made the legal learning process more realistic, contextual, and practice-oriented. The legal clinic coordinator assigned students to three teams: marketing and publicity (including social media), database and client management, and research and multimedia. Within this initiative, the students took on roles as legal trainees and assistant managers (Che Musa & Nawi, 2021).

Interaction with real clients allows students to understand the realities of community life and apply a holistic problem-solving approach. Examples of cases that support this finding include single mothers' child custody

applications, matrimonial property issues, and child support neglect cases, all of which require students to assess emotional, social, and legal aspects simultaneously. In this case, students do not simply refer to the law literally, but also consider wisdom, maqasid syariah, and cultural sensitivity.

In addition, the virtual learning environment also builds professional communication skills, as students need to interact through the screen using polite, clear language appropriate to the legal context. This indirectly trains them to be professional, patient, and sensitive to the needs and background of the client. This approach is also aligned with experiential learning, as Butler et al. (2019) described, where students acquire knowledge through the cycle of "doing, reflecting, thinking, and applying". Therefore, this approach aligns with the principle of experiential learning, which emphasises the active involvement of students in a learning environment that resembles the real world.

Graph 2: Total Clients



Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that must be considered when interpreting the results. First, the sample of cases analysed only involves a specific period, namely between 2020 and 2021, which may not represent the overall trend of e-consultation use in the long term, especially after the end of the critical phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, this study relies heavily on student reports, the documentation level of which varies in terms of depth of information and accuracy of interpretation of legal facts. This dependence can affect the reliability of the data analysed, especially when no cross-validation is done with clients or supervisors. The study states that this model limits qualified professional development activities, potentially hinders the achievement of the objectives pursued and restricts innovative practices in this field (Legal Education and Training Review, 2013).

Third, the scope of this study is limited to one higher education institution, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), which may not sufficiently represent other institutions' experiences in implementing e-consultation or clinical legal education models. Finally, the lack of real-time observation of student-client interactions and direct client feedback limits understanding of the actual effectiveness of e-consultation services from a user perspective.

Recommendations for Enhancing the Implementation of E-Consultation at the Faculty of Syariah and Law (FSU)

Based on the findings throughout the study, several key recommendations are proposed to improve the

effectiveness, consistency, and long-term sustainability of the e-Consultation initiative at the Faculty of Syariah and Law, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). This proposal emphasises providing a uniform and detailed e-consultation report template. The template should include case background, legal issues, legal analysis, proposed solutions, and student reflections. This will facilitate the documentation process and objective lecturer evaluation and support the creation of quality reference materials.

Constructing a secure and anonymised e-Consultation case database is important as a teaching reference material, for monitoring community legal issues, and as a source of academic research. Access needs to be controlled to maintain the confidentiality of client information. This aligns with what Maharg (2007) emphasised: hands-on legal education must be supported by systems that encourage reflection, proper documentation, and full integration into the curriculum. Without these elements, the full benefits of CLE might not be realised.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that using e-consultation in legal education is an effective and sustainable approach that benefits students and the community. At USIM's Legal Clinic, students had the chance to deal with real legal problems, especially in family law, while guided by experienced legal practitioners. This hands-on experience helped students improve their legal skills and taught them to be more empathetic and ethically responsible, which are important for future lawyers who want to serve society.

In the face of various social challenges and increasingly complex legal issues, this approach proves that experiential learning in legal education can produce knowledgeable, caring graduates willing to serve the community. Therefore, this study was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of e-Consultation and to reorganise real cases so that they can be used as systematic learning materials in modules related to Syariah and civil law.

As a suggestion for further research, artificial intelligence (AI) technology can be explored to automate the registration and categorisation of cases in the e-consultation system. The study can also be extended to other university law faculties to assess the effectiveness of this model in different contexts. In addition, collaboration with legal aid institutions and the implementation of client satisfaction surveys can strengthen the impact and reach of this program.

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