Queen's University Belfast
PhD Law Student Conference
19th September 2025

The Moot Court,
School of Law

Conference Organisers:
Dr. Norah Burns
Karena McErlean
Daniela Janikova

Queen's University Belfast QUB PhD Law Student Conference

Schedule

Queen's University Belfast QUB PhD Law Student Conference			
Registration 09.15			
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Panel 5 **Law and Technology: Accountability in the age of AI**	15.30 - 17.00	Cécile Louise Harrault Dhanusha Hema Reddy Ayesha Youssuf Abbasi Gizem Yardimci *Chair: Dr Tomás McInerney*	*Pages 10-11*
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Panel 1

Rethinking Protection and Accountability: Peacekeeping, Constructive Interpretation, and Displacement

09.45 - 11.15

Chair: Professor Kathryn McNeilly

Alisha Syali
Damodaram Sanjivayya National Law University
09.45-10.00

Title: Peacekeeping in Flux: Legal Responses to the Evolving Nature of UN Mandates and the Challenge of Civilian Protection

As asymmetrical and protracted conflicts become the new normal around the world, the United Nations has actively responded with authorisation of more robust mandates of peacekeeping operations in many instances allowing the use of force that is traditionally not a part of the self-defence mechanisms as opposed to purely offensive actions against non-state armed groups. This evolution refers to shift from classical Chapter VI missions to Chapter VII enforcement-style operations and cause some urgent questions to be raised as regards the legality of the compatibility of such mandates with central principles of international law namely with those of civilian protection and the respect of human rights.

In this paper, we shall critically analyse how the legal framework of UN peacekeeping has found it difficult to keep up with the reality of its operations in these challenging circumstances. It relies on International Human Rights Law (IHRL) and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and evaluates how effective mandates support or undercut the main duty that the UN owes the people in conflict areas: the protection of civilians. The paper examines the conflict between increased employment of force and the duty to respect, protect and fulfil human rights.

By means of doctrinal analysis and case studies, this study examines the ambiguities that exist at the level of norm and in practice around peacekeeping's evolving mandate. It focuses on key accountability gaps, especially pertaining to civilian protection, absence of reparative mechanisms, lack of political solutions for lasting peace and accountability.

The paper asserts that human rights-based approach should be the epicentre of the future reform of UN peace operations. This involves more comprehensible legal standards governing use of force, institutionalised civilian protection means, mechanisms of accountability stemming to provide redress to victims of human right infringement.

John Thomas
Queen's University Belfast
10.00-10.15

Title: Dworkin's Theory of Constructive Interpretation and How Constructive Interpretation Can Be Used to Interpret the Law.

The presentation will focus on Ronald Dworkin's theory of constructive interpretation and analyse how constructive interpretation can be helpful in interpreting law. Dworkin's theory of constructive interpretation has three stages. The first stage, the 'pre-interpretive stage' will be used in to understand the purpose and function of law. The second stage, the 'interpretative stage' will entail forming an interpretive theory of the best justification and moral value to a law. The third stage, the 'post-interpretive stage' focuses on what the purpose and function of law would need to be if the law was seen 'in its best light.' Viewing the law in 'its best light' will involve forming an argument of what the function and purpose of the law will need to be in order to reflect the justification and moral value established at the interpretive stage. Through viewing law 'in its best light' an opportunity will arise in which a critique can be made of the limitations or merits of the law through comparing the conclusions drawn at the 'post interpretive' stage and comparing the conclusions to the analysis undertaken in the 'pre-interpretive stage.'

Despite the merit that can be placed on constructive interpretation as a method of interpreting law, limitations to the theory will also be highlighted, especially the challenges in understanding how the theory of constructive interpretation can be applied to interpreting law. The new law addressing hate crime in Northern Ireland will act as an example for the presentation to understand the applicably of constructive interpretation in interpreting law. The presentation will conclude that the use of constructive interpretation can be applied to a wide range of laws and be a valuable vantage point to understand law in greater depth.

Amy Rutherford
Queen's University Belfast
10.15-10.30

Title: Human Rights for Irregular Migrants in Transit: Lessons from Panama

Irregular migrants are entitled to protection under international human rights law (IHRL). Yet, these rights are routinely undermined in transit contexts, where legal norms confront practical constraints, fragmented jurisdiction, and policy ambiguity. This study investigates how such rights are implemented and eroded in Panama, a key migration corridor between South and North America. As a country with increasing regional and global significance in migration routes (particularly through the Darién Gap), Panama provides a critical site for examining how IHRL operates beyond the formal commitments of treaty ratification. By combining legal analysis with stakeholder interviews and policy review, this research explores the disjuncture between legal obligation and lived reality. The project contributes to legal scholarship by critically examining the normative and empirical gaps in IHRL protection for irregular migrants, while also responding to the broader challenge of aligning humanitarian governance with legal accountability in the Americas.

Oğuzhan Öztürk
Leiden University
10.30-10.45

Title: Refugees as Emerging Actors of International Law

The Refugee Convention was codified during the early post-WWII era, influenced by the geographical tensions of the time. The two blocs of the world order played a significant role in the codification process. They accused each other of exploiting refugees against their countries of origin. Moreover, the Cold War triggered mistrust among States, which led States to adopt a policy on depoliticizing refugeehood. Furthermore, some earlier horrific experiences with foreigners, such as the assassination of the Yugoslav King in France by foreigners, caused France to argue in favor of restrictive approaches. Combinations of these historical realities led States to enact restrictive policies toward refugees' political activities. That is why the 'non-political' clause in Article 15 of the Refugee Convention was introduced. The clause aimed to prevent refugees from engaging in political activities within the territories of the host States. This depoliticization has led to the creation of a passive portrayal of refugees in international politics; however, the demographics of refugees have shifted over the decades. Nowadays, refugees have not hesitated to speak out when necessary. They have become active subjects of international law; they organize protests within host States, demand their rights, and challenge the status quo of the post-World War II era, reconsidering their role in a multipolar international legal order. This paper examines how the historical depoliticization of refugeehood continues to influence contemporary refugee law and explores the evolving role of refugees as actors of international law in an increasingly contested and multipolar world.

Q&A: 10.45-11.15 **Coffee Break: 11.15-11.30**

Panel 2
Law, Identity and Inclusion

11.30 - 13.00
Chair: Dr. Alice Diver

Ningning Liu
Queen's University Belfast
11.30-11.45

Title: Negotiating Women's Right to Political Participation: Western Ideals, Confucianism, and Feminist Struggles in Modern China (1840 1920)

The period of 1840 – 1920 in China was characterised by significant socio-political and cultural upheavals, including foreign invasions, the collapse of the Qing monarchy (1644 – 1911), and semi colonial exploitation. These challenges also gave rise to evolving discourses on human rights and women's emancipation. By the late Qing, Chinese women faced systemic oppression influenced by centuries of Confucian ideals. They were confined to domestic roles, denied education, and excluded from public and political life. Reformists looked to Western ideals of liberty and equality in their search for solutions to the nation's crises, arguing that women's liberation was critical to the country's revitalisation and modernisation. While there was a broad consensus on women's marital and educational advancement, opinions diverged sharply on women's political empowerment, echoing debates within Western suffrage movements.

By examining how Chinese reformists and feminists strategically articulated and reinterpreted Western conceptions to challenge patriarchal and imperial structures and frame women's rights, this study reconstructs how women's political inclusion in Modern China was debated within a context shaped by both Western influences and indigenous Chinese traditions. Through a socio-legal and gendered analysis of primary historical texts, including newspaper articles and petitions, it critically investigates both supportive and opposing views on women's right to political participation during this transformative era.

Situating early Chinese feminist activism within broader global struggles for gender equality, this study emphasises the critical role of gendered perspectives in rethinking legal historiography in both China and globalised contexts. By expanding the scope of international legal history to include diverse and marginalised voice, this paper argues that the historical struggles for Chinese women's pursuit of political inclusion offer valuable insights into contemporary challenges of achieving gender equality and justice. Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of decolonising international legal histories and constructing more inclusive global futures.

Aileen Thomson
Ulster University
11.45-12.00

Title: Intergenerational truth and memory in Myanmar's Spring Revolution

Myanmar's most recent democratic movement, often referred to as the "Spring Revolution", builds on the legacies and lessons of previous "generations" including the 1988 Uprising and the 2007 Saffron Revolution. It also differs in many ways including approaches to memory and justice. During the brief period of democratization from 2012-2021, leaders including Aung San Suu Kyi prioritized maintaining relationships with the military over discussion of the past. In contrast, actors in the current revolution frequently discuss the need for transitional justice in the future. One feature of these discussions and policies is a focus on crimes committed since the 2021 coup.

Meanwhile, actors in the Spring Revolution have been using storytelling through narrative and the arts to create communities of memory based on shared experiences and key incidents and individuals, most of which have occurred since the coup. This presentation, based on interviews and observations among the Myanmar exile community in Thailand in July and August 2025, presents some preliminary findings on intergenerational dynamics that may influence memory and storytelling. These dynamics include guilt and blame between generations, as many young people feel they must "finish the job" that older generations should have completed. The presentation also looks at the use of pre-coup memory in emerging communities of memory. It looks at dynamics which may support and prevent transmission of memory, and how memory of the past is or is not used in the present. This is part of a larger PhD project on Myanmar political activists' perceptions of (in)justice and their uses of personal narratives of injustice in their respective movements. It seeks to contribute to literature on intergenerational memory and the use of memory by social movements, including the role of fictive kinship relations in movement 'generations' and tensions between generations regarding movement strategies and outcomes.

Hannah Garland
Dublin City University
12.00-12.15

Title: An Exploration of Personhood Within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Persons with disabilities have long faced individual and systemic discrimination, manifested through social barriers and disadvantages that are deeply engrained. Disability—as a definition, a concept, and a lived experience—is complex. The creation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) attempted to recognise this complexity and address the evolving nature of disability by protecting the rights of persons with disabilities through a human rights framework.

The UNCRPD places emphasis on inherent dignity, individual autonomy, and legal capacity. Together these concepts compose a framework for understanding personhood. The personhood of persons with disabilities has long been challenged through denial of legal capacity due to claims of diminished mental capacity. Additionally, how we understand personhood is now increasingly challenged due to applications of artificial intelligence as assistive technology. These challenges make the understanding of personhood as it relates to disability particularly important.

This presentation of my research will proceed in two parts: first it will discuss historical context of the drafting of the UNCRPD and the ways in which the participation of persons with disabilities sets the stage for understanding the UNCRPD through a lens of personhood. Second, it will look to specific sections of the UNCRPD—notably articles relating to autonomy and capacity—to analyse how the UNCRPD implicitly and explicitly addresses themes of personhood.

The research presented here is part of a larger context: an analysis of legal and ethical issues posed by artificial intelligence in relation to disability and personhood. This presentation will not explore the full scope of that research, but instead will use artificial intelligence as an illustration for why understanding personhood is topical and vital to the continued protection of the rights of persons with disabilities.

Matthew McCallion
Queen's University Belfast
12.15-12.30

Title: Boasting or Infodumping? A Neurodivergent Reframing of Autistic Expression and Language in Criminal Law

This paper re-examines the Court of Appeal's reasoning in R v Dunleavy [2021] EWCA Crim 39 through the lens of the neurodiversity paradigm. It enquires as to whether the outcome might have differed had the defendant's communication been framed not as 'boasting' but as 'infodumping'. The judgment relied heavily on the defendant's apparent 'enjoyment' in discussing his actions and knowledge of right-wing extremism (for which he had been charged under UK anti-terrorism legislation), interpreting this behaviour in morally pejorative terms of 'boasting'. Yet for autistic individuals, 'infodumping' (i.e. the repetitive sharing of information, particularly concerning that individual's 'special interest') is not necessarily expressive of emotional gratification or malicious intent, but rather may reflect neurological coping mechanisms via self-stimulatory regulation (or 'stimming').

This paper explores how such distinctions in language and framing could materially affect the interpretation of evidence and intent in criminal trials involving autistic defendants. Drawing from developments in scholarship on the neurodiversity paradigm and linguistic reframing, it critiques the persistence of deficit-based descriptors – such as 'obsessions' or 'restricted interests' – in legal and clinical discourse. These terminologies, rooted in the norms of neurotypical external observers, continue to inform courtroom interpretations of autistic defendants' exhibited behaviours and oral testimonies, often misrepresenting their actual perspectives.

The paper advocates for a more informed and respectful engagement with autistic modes of communication within the criminal justice system. It offers practical guidance for legal professionals and judicial actors on how to distinguish between behaviours that may appear incriminating when viewed through a neurotypical lens and those better understood as features of autistic characteristics. Ultimately, it intends to serve as a means of advising defence barristers and solicitors on how to better articulate and advocate for their autistic clients within the broader context of the ongoing shift from the pathology paradigm to the neurodiversity paradigm.

Q&A: 12.30 – 13.00 ***Lunch 13.00 -13.30***

Panel 3: Career Development Panel

13.30 – 14.15

Speakers:

Professor Aoife O'Donoghue
Dr. Peter Doran
Dr. Ciarán O'Kelly

Panel 4

Governance and Justice in Environmental, Marine, and Business Law

14:15 - 15.15

Chair: Dr. Clemens Rieder

Claudia Allen
Queen's University Belfast
14.15-14.30

Title: To Catch or Conserve? Marine governance and the UK-EU sandeel dispute.

Transboundary governance of shared resources is challenging due to the interaction of different legal orders at international, regional and national levels (Boyes and Elliot, 2016), resulting in either cohesive or conflicting legal orders where policy goals and outcomes are misaligned. This difficulty is visible when attempting to govern shared fish stocks within the northeast Atlantic. The EU-UK sandeel dispute exemplifies this issue from broad EU-UK positions. To protect declining UK seabird populations, The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in England and the Marine Directorate in Scotland prohibited the commercial fishing of sandeels within the UK's Exclusive Economic Zone, including the Dogger Bank fishing area, which includes important fishing grounds for the EU fleet. Sandeels are a vital food source for many UK seabird species, yet overfishing is reducing food availability and has been linked to a decrease in seabird abundance – with puffin populations declining 24% over the past two decades (Harris et al., 2024). The EU's Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries contested the closure in reference to obligations in the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement. Specifically: that the ban was (a) not based on scientific measures (Article 946 (2), (b) disproportionate and discriminatory (Article 496 (1); 494 (3) (3)) towards EU vessels as the grounds are predominantly fished by the Danish fleet, (c) preventing access to UK waters (Annex 38). This presentation uses this dispute as a case study to explore the potential for conflicts through divergence of legislation post-Brexit. It identifies a misalignment of environmental versus economic policy objectives and demonstrates the transferability of such a scenario to the island of Ireland, with potential for similar regulatory divergence between north and south. It does so to inform the broader focus of my PhD research addressing broader discussions on cohesive and cooperative governance of transboundary fisheries resources.

Tanaka Dhumbura
University of KwaZulu-Natal
14.30-14.45

Title: Embedding Intergenerational Equity in Environmental Governance: A Justice-Based Framework for South Africa

Climate change has reached an irreversible stage, exposing a fractured society to further environmental damage. This calls for an urgent need to incorporate forward-thinking ideas into environmental policy and law in light of the growing body of information indicating that temperatures are rising, droughts are getting worse, coastal flooding is occurring, and there are challenges to food and water security. Due to the continuous occurrence of these hazards, not only are present generations at risk, but also future generations, who will bear the full brunt of climate change. The current laws and policies omit to emphasise the importance of considering the impact of our actions today on future generations. This calls for a more inclusive guiding principle. Intergenerational equity provides a convincing ethical framework for environmental governance in South Africa for present and future generations. Intergenerational equity is a concept that is founded on the ideas of justice, sustainability, and long-term accountability. Its primary objective is to guarantee that the decisions made today do not threaten the rights and well-being of future generations. Furthermore, it is based on the constitutional values of South Africa, which include social justice, equality, and dignity, and it resonates with global climate frameworks such as the Paris Agreement and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In South Africa, strengthening environmental stewardship, promoting children's rights, and cultivating a more sustainable and just ecological future could be accomplished by institutionalising intergenerational equity. Therefore, this research seeks to expose the importance of intergenerational equity in the South African legal system to advance future generations' interests. This research will examine this position by looking at several factors, such as the legal position of intergenerational equity in international law and its adoption in the South African legal system.

Onyinyechi Akagha
University of Limerick
14.45-15.00

Title: An Investigation into the Suitability and Effectiveness of Corporate Governance Regulations within Family Businesses Dynamics: Perspectives from some selected Nigerian Family Businesses

This research study investigates the provisions and structure of the extant corporate governance regulations within the Nigerian legal system and the challenges experienced by family business owners in implementing the established governance principles and practices, which do not seem compatible with the dynamic nature of the family business relations and operations. The methodology applied in this research work is the legal research methodology using research methods such as doctrinal, critical and legal analysis. The research is interdisciplinary, thus, the inclusion of the qualitative research method.

In 2024, empirical research was conducted by carrying out semi-structured research interviews on five family businesses and two regulatory agencies. The empirical research was necessary due to the pragmatic nature of the research and the evident interaction between law and society. The research participants were randomly selected, and the basic criteria for choosing the family businesses were that each family business must be incorporated under the government companies' registry. The two participant regulatory agencies are the main regulators in charge of governance issues. The data collected from the interviews were analysed, coded and classified under various themes. The discussion on the findings was based on each of the selected themes relevant to the research questions.

The findings from the fieldwork revealed that there are various factors, including family dynamics, that influence family business owners' decisions on whether to implement recommended governance practices and how to implement governance rules and guidelines. Examples of such factors that influence the effectiveness of the governance regulations are poor cultural adaptation to governance structures, the high cost of implementing governance rules, the cumbersome nature and complexity in the design of the governance rules and guidelines. Amongst other recommendations, the researcher proposed incorporating workable governance systems and tools into family businesses, including establishing flexible and culturally adaptable governance principles and practices that can accommodate the dynamism found in family businesses.

Q&A: 15.00 – 15.15 ***Coffee Break: 15.15 - 15.30***

Panel 5
Law and Technology: Accountability in the age of AI

15.30-17.00
Chair: Dr Tomás McInerney

Cécile Louise Harrault
Queen's University Belfast, LINAS
15.30-15.45

Title: Platform Due Process: How Effective Are Appeal Mechanisms for Algorithmic Content Removal?

Social media platforms have become the de facto public square, yet the governance of speech within these spaces is increasingly determined not by courts or legislatures, but by algorithms. Automated content moderation (ACM) now removes the majority of user generated content (UGC) flagged for review, often before human eyes ever see it. While these systems promise efficiency at scale, they raise acute questions of transparency, fairness, and accountability. When speech is restricted by opaque machine-driven processes, what mechanisms remain for users to seek justice? This presentation critically examines the effectiveness of appeal mechanisms offered by major platforms - such as Meta, YouTube, and TikTok - in safeguarding users' fundamental rights. Anchored in a doctrinal analysis of the EU Digital Services Act (DSA) and the UK Online Safety Act (OSA), it interrogates whether these frameworks provide meaningful procedural guarantees aligned with Article 10 and Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Article 47 of the EU Charter. Drawing on platform transparency report and case studies, along with comparative perspectives from the United States and China, the presentation will argue that existing appeal systems fall short of due process standards. Users face black-box decision-making, inaccessible or ineffective remedies, and discriminatory outcomes driven by algorithmic bias. While the DSA and OSA represent significant regulatory progress, their enforcement mechanisms remain fragmented and overly deferential to corporate discretion. To bridge this gap, this presentation proposes an interdisciplinary framework combining independent appeals bodies, mandatory bias audits, explainable AI requirements, and cross-jurisdictional harmonisation. By reframing platform due process as a non-negotiable rights obligation rather than a corporate courtesy within the realm of UGC moderation, I reimagine this digital governance in a way that aligns technological efficiency with the imperatives of human rights.

Dhanusha Hema Reddy
Aston University
15.45-16.00

Title: Proprietary Rights in Crypto Assets Under The Common Law

England and Wales have recognised native crypto assets such as Bitcoin as property. This is due to case laws such as AA v Persons Unknown and the subsequent Law Commission of England and Wales evaluation on crypto assets, which concluded that crypto assets can be considered property. The Property (Digital Assets etc.) Bill proposes that a thing qualifies as property even if it does not fall within the existing categories of a thing in possession or a thing in action, thereby enabling the recognition of a third category of property. However, the classification of crypto assets as a third category has created confusion on whether it is feasible to create a security interest in native crypto assets. Therefore, the research aims to determine whether it is possible to create pledges, liens, equitable charges, and mortgages using native crypto assets. This research adopts a doctrinal legal approach to address this gap, drawing on key sources, including statutes, case law, and international instruments. The research contributes by proposing soft law recommendations based on an analysis of the UNIDROIT Principles on Digital Assets and Private Law. Therefore, there is a need for England and Wales to reform in order to accommodate native crypto assets for the use of security interests. By doing so, the research will provide opportunities for both consumers and businesses to access finance more easily.

Ayesha Youssuf Abbasi
Zhongnan University of Economics and Law, China
16.00-16.15

Title: Evaluating the Potential of AI-Enabled Weapons to Reduce Collateral Damage under the Principle of Proportionality in International Humanitarian Law

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into military operations is reshaping the legal landscape of armed conflict. As AI-enabled weapons systems that assist human operators in identifying, tracking, or prioritising targets become operational in wars such as those in Gaza and Ukraine, they challenge the application of one of international humanitarian law's (IHL) core tenets: the principle of proportionality. Codified in Article 51(5)(b) of Additional Protocol I and customary IHL Rule 14, this principle prohibits attacks in which expected civilian harm is excessive in relation to anticipated military advantage. This paper examines whether AI-enabled targeting systems, which promise increased speed and precision, truly enhance compliance with the proportionality principle or merely obscure accountability under a veneer of technological sophistication. It offers a doctrinal legal analysis of treaty law, international jurisprudence, and military practice, and critically evaluates the interaction between AI technologies and human judgment in battlefield decision-making. Drawing on real-world examples, such as AI-supported collateral damage estimation tools and algorithmic target prioritisation, the paper assesses both the claimed benefits and the inherent risks of using AI in proportionality assessments. These include automation bias, opaque decision-making, and the diffusion of legal responsibility. The analysis argues that while AI may improve targeting efficiency, it may also mask uncertainty and undermine the subjective, context-specific evaluations required under IHL.

To address these challenges, the paper proposes reinforcing weapons reviews under Article 36 of Additional Protocol I, ensuring legally meaningful human control, and establishing transparency obligations for AI-enabled systems. By critically evaluating how algorithmic tools influence proportionality assessments, this paper contributes to ongoing debates about the regulation of military AI, the future of IHL, and the enduring need to protect civilians in an increasingly automated battlespace.

Gizem Yardimci
Maynooth University, Ireland
16.15-16.30

Title: How does the European Union's AI Act Regulate Political Bots: Legal Uncertainties and Structural Complexities

In the early 2000s, particularly from 2007 onwards, a new phase in political campaigning had emerged, marked by the proliferation of troll farms and bot armies. These dynamics contributed to the growing transformation of political communication strategies into what is known as computational propaganda. AI-driven online political bots are increasingly employed for manipulative purposes during electoral processes, such as the BREXIT referendum, the 2016 US presidential election, or the Catalan independence referendum, often in conjunction with political propaganda. By 2024, elections had taken place in over 70 countries, meaning that more than half of the world's population had participated in democratic processes. Recent research claims that individuals were directed or manipulated by generative AI-driven political bots during these elections. Political bots are defined as any bots that are used for political purposes during political campaigns.

This research investigates how the AI Act categorises political bots and whether this categorisation can effectively address the risks they pose to democratic processes. It identifies potential gaps for managing fair democratic processes within the AI Act. The analysis is grounded in Habermas's public and private spheres theory. Methodologically, the research adopts a socio-legal and qualitative approach. To conduct a law-in context analysis, the research provides document analysis including the AI Act, its accompanying guidelines and code of conducts and practices. Semi-structured interviews with professionals in AI were analysed by using MAXQDA.

Q&A: 16.30 – 17.00 ***Conference End & Drinks Reception***