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**«USE OF MOOT COURT AS A PLATFORM FOR LEGAL TRAINING: BETWEEN
ACADEMIC TRADITION AND PROFESSIONAL STANDARD»**

Abstract. *The article examines modern approaches to developing practical skills among law students, with a focus on the use of moot court simulations. It highlights the evolution of traditional practices, such as attending real court sessions and interacting with judges, and their supplementation with innovative methods, including mock trials and work in legal clinics. Special attention is given to the experience of Odesa I.I. Mechnikov National University, which has established partnerships with local courts to provide students with anonymized real case files for simulated proceedings. Students act as parties, prosecutors, and judges under the guidance of practicing lawyers and with feedback from actual judges. This model offers the closest approximation to real litigation, fostering students' legal argumentation, courtroom rhetoric, analytical thinking, and communication skills, while also increasing their employability. Moot court practice is presented as a vital tool for bridging theoretical knowledge with professional competencies in modern legal education.*

Keywords: *moot court, legal education, practical skills, courtroom training.*

The improvement of legal aid mechanisms is inextricably linked to the enhancement of the educational process in universities aimed at training graduates in the legal profession. The professional standard for legal education requires the development of practical skills related to participation in court proceedings and the representation of the interests of individuals and legal entities in court.

The academic tradition of acquiring courtroom participation skills by law students has always been associated with attending court sessions and becoming familiar with legal proceedings through participation in actual hearings as observers. During such sessions, students gain insight into the behavior of the parties and the court during proceedings, the impact of the parties' positions on the outcome, and other influential factors. Introductory tours of court registries and archives, as well as direct communication with judges before or after hearings –during which judges analyze specific cases and draw students' attention to procedural nuances and the positions of various participants – contribute significantly to the professional development of future legal practitioners.

Theoretical foundations of judicial law are introduced to law students from their first year, particularly through the study of the course "Organization of Judicial and Law Enforcement Bodies," and are further developed across numerous courses with a procedural and legal orientation.

In recent years, the practice of conducting mock trial simulations during seminar (practical) sessions has become increasingly widespread. In these sessions, students are assigned the roles of the parties and the court, and they engage in a simulated adversarial process based on a simplified case scenario. At the end of the simulation, the instructor provides feedback, which helps students better prepare for participation in real court proceedings.

Mock trials remain an important and effective tool for developing legal argumentation and courtroom rhetoric. They prepare students to engage in litigation in various procedural roles, such as plaintiff, defendant, prosecutor, judge, and, occasionally, expert witness, specialist, or court clerk.

In addition, the University operates a legal clinic headed by a practicing attorney who is also a faculty member. The clinic regularly receives both online and in-person inquiries and requests from citizens concerning inheritance issues, contract law, and other relevant legal matters. Under the supervision of the clinic director, participating students draft reasoned responses to these inquiries. In this way, students gain practical experience in legal counseling, client intake, and the provision of legal services – skills essential for future work in legal aid offices, law firms, and similar professional settings.

These forms of skill acquisition related to courtroom participation are widely practiced throughout Ukraine.

However, in this presentation, I would like to share the experience of the Odesa I.I. Mechnikov National University in expanding the use of moot court as a platform for legal education.

Our university has established close and lasting partnerships with several courts in Odesa, in particular, the Commercial Court of the Odesa Region –which is a specialized court handling disputes arising from commercial (entrepreneurial) activities – and the Prymorskyi District Court of Odesa, which adjudicates criminal, civil, and administrative offense cases.

Over the years, we have developed a practical format through this cooperation: the courts provide anonymized case files from actual previously adjudicated cases. As a rule, these cases are not "simple" – they typically involve multiple claims, a large set of evidence, and a complex and sometimes contradictory regulatory framework. Students representing the parties to the dispute (usually two students per a party, and often also a student representing the prosecutor claiming the state interest in the case) are required to study the case materials, modify, supplement, or expand the claims and arguments, and submit relevant motions and petitions. Students acting as judges (a panel of three) must examine the case materials and the parties' positions, consider their motions and petitions, and ultimately render a decision on the merits of the case.

Typically, fourth-year students act as parties to the case, fifth-year students serve as the judicial panel, and second- or third-year students take on the role of court clerks.

To ensure that the teams representing the parties and the prosecution perform their roles appropriately, they are assigned consultants by the university – practicing lawyers, attorneys, and

alumni of Odesa I.I. Mechnikov National University. To adequately prepare the student judges, the judicial team attends several real court sessions prior to the moot trials and, under the supervision of the deputy chief judge, discusses different models of judicial behavior during the hearing of a case.

The first session is preparatory, during which the parties submit motions. The second session involves the substantive hearing of the case, including debates and the rendering and announcement of the judgment by the student judges.

A key distinctive feature of this moot court format, according to feedback, is not only that both sessions are conducted directly in a courtroom within the court building but also that real judges from the hosting court (usually the chairperson and several other judges) serve as a “jury” during the moot trials. After each session, they provide detailed feedback to the participants, highlighting strengths and areas for improvement in their performance.

Therefore, this format appears to be the closest approximation to real court proceedings and proves to be the most effective for developing practical skills in courtroom participation. Students not only consolidate their knowledge of procedural law but also acquire the ability to draft procedural documents. Additionally, through oral arguments, they develop rhetorical, analytical, and communication skills. Practice shows that all members of the moot court teams, including the student judges, often receive job offers from leading Odesa law firms and courts even before graduating from the university.

Moot court simulation is an essential component of modern legal education, enabling law students to apply theoretical knowledge in practice, hone their professional competencies, and prepare for real-world legal careers.

Promising directions for the use of moot court simulations as a platform for legal training include the expansion of cooperation with courts, as well as participation in moot court competitions organized at the national and international levels. Such initiatives allow students from different educational institutions to enhance their professional competencies through experience exchange and exposure to diverse formats and specific features of various types of legal proceedings.