Environmental law enthusiast Amelia Keene has won the 2012 New Zealand Law Foundation Ethel Benjamin Scholarship for outstanding young woman lawyers.

Amelia will use the $50,000 award to undertake an LLM course at Columbia University in New York. Her research paper will compare regulatory models of fresh water management in New Zealand and the United States, focusing on environmental federalism.

“The central thesis is that the National Policy Statement on water represents a shift away from regional council autonomy towards central government control,” she says.

“There’s been a lot of analysis on environmental federalism in the US, in terms of whether it achieves better water outcomes, from both an economic and a public participation perspective. But it hasn’t been the focus of academic commentary here.

“I don’t necessarily think centralism is bad, the question is how we can best structure it to achieve the right balance.”

Currently a solicitor at Chapman Tripp Sheffield Young in Wellington, Amelia was clerk for the President of the Court of Appeal, Justice O’Regan, after being admitted to the bar in 2010. Before that, she gained a First Class Honours degree in law from Victoria, along with a BA in History and Philosophy.

Amelia says the award allows her to pursue an interest she feels very strongly about.

“I haven’t had the chance to do a lot of environmental law thus far, so this gives me the opportunity to develop a specialisation…it has come at exactly the right time,” she says.

The Ethel Benjamin scholarship honours New Zealand’s first woman barrister and solicitor, who was admitted to the bar in 1897. Since the centenary of this event, the Law Foundation has awarded this scholarship annually to outstanding New Zealand women law graduates for post-graduate study. The award is worth up to $50,000 and details of the award and previous winners can be found on the Foundation’s website www.lawfoundation.org.nz