Converting to a career in law

This leaflet provides the answers to the questions non-law students ask when seeking a career in law in England and Wales. It covers initial legal training, conversion courses and other general questions including international and academic issues.

The information in this leaflet is correct to the best of our knowledge at the time of writing but could change, so you should check the sources quoted for up to date information. Possible changes to legal training may come about following current consultations.

Initial legal training

- Conversion courses
- Legal Practice Course
- Bar Professional Training Course

To become a solicitor or barrister in England and Wales you need to complete the academic stage which is either a qualifying law degree or conversion course (Common Professional Examination – CPE and Graduate Diploma in Law – GDL), followed by the practical/vocational stage: for solicitors the Legal Practice Course (LPC) and for barristers the Bar Professional Training Course (BPTC). An alternative to the GDL is the senior status law degree, for which applications are made through UCAS. Check providers for further details.

In addition to the sites mentioned in this leaflet, you can find information about courses on the following websites:

Chambers and Partners – www.chambersandpartners.com
Prospects – www.prospects.ac.uk/law
Solicitors Regulation Authority – www.sra.org.uk

You should also note that completion of legal training, while preparing you for legal practice, does not guarantee you a training opportunity as a solicitor or barrister.

Conversion courses

1. How do I apply for the CPE/GDL and when is the deadline?
   For full-time courses you apply online through the Central Applications Board which includes details of all the course providers. There are various start dates each year and no deadline.
   All instructions about how to apply can be found on the website. For part-time courses you should apply directly to the relevant institution.
   www.lawcabs.ac.uk

2. How do I decide which is the best conversion course for me and does it matter which one I choose as far as employers are concerned?
   All courses have to cover the same core elements and are approved by the Solicitors Regulation Authority and Bar Standard Board and therefore have to meet an agreed standard.

   Employers do not generally mind where you do your conversion course, even if they are funding you. However, some firms will advise you to undertake the GDL at a named provider. Therefore some factors to consider in choosing a course include: cost; whether you prefer a university law school or an independent provider; location; facilities and resources; careers support; employer links; whether you want somewhere you can continue on to LPC or BPTC. Take advantage of open days and find out as much as possible about courses.

3. Senior status law degree
   Some institutions offer senior status law degrees. These are usually two-year courses which are qualifying law degrees. You will graduate with a bachelor of law (LLB) or a masters of law degree (LLM) as opposed to a graduate diploma.

   This route may be of interest if you wish to study law in more depth and over a longer period (CPE/GDL courses are intensive one-year courses), you can then progress onto the LPC or BPTC.

   Note that LLM degrees are not usually qualifying law degrees.
as they involve study of a specialist area of law rather than the required breadth of legal topics.

4. Some course providers are awarding an LLB/MA on completion of CPE/ GDL plus LPC or BPTC. Will this make a difference as far as employers are concerned?
This is a relatively new development which might be of interest to you if you prefer to have LLB status on completion of your legal studies. See the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) website for more details.

www.sra.org.uk

5. How much does the CPE/GDL cost and is funding available?
The fees payable do vary. Please check providers for current pricing. If you have been offered a place as a trainee solicitor with one of the larger firms then they will usually pay your fee. Smaller firms rarely offer this financial support.

The Law Society has some bursaries available but many students self-fund their study.

www.lawsociety.org

For intending barristers, scholarships are available from the four Inns of Court on a competitive basis, but again many students self-fund. Closing dates for GDL scholarships will be early May. Please check the Inns of Court for precise details.

Becoming a solicitor

After completion of the LPC you have to complete a two-year training contract with a firm/employer approved by the Law Society. This is a period of practical experience under the supervision of qualified solicitors and on successful completion you are qualified as a solicitor.

Please note that routes to qualification may change following current consultations taking place with the Law Society which aim to introduce more flexibility to the work-based learning stage. For full information on how to become a solicitor, visit the Law Society website.

www.lawsociety.org.uk

1. How are vacancies advertised?
This will depend on the size of the firm. Larger firms of solicitors and public sector recruiters such as the Government Legal Service will usually promote their opportunities through advertising in law careers publications which are available to take away from our offices and on the following websites:

Prospects – www.prospects.ac.uk/law
Chambers Student – www.chambersstudent.co.uk

2. When should I apply for a training contract?
Larger firms of solicitors usually recruit two years ahead with deadlines around the end of July for training contracts starting in the summer/autumn two years later. Non-law students should apply during their final year (note that some firms have earlier deadlines for non-law students). Smaller firms do not recruit so far ahead so deadlines will vary.

3. How can I get relevant work experience?
Larger firms of solicitors offer structured paid work placements of one to two weeks at Christmas, Easter and in the summer. They also offer open days too. Deadlines can be as early as October through to February/March.

For smaller firms, work experience may be more informal unpaid experience or work shadowing obtained through direct approaches. Volunteering experience may also be relevant depending on the area of law you wish to get into.

4. Smaller firms don’t seem to advertise training contract vacancies – how can I apply?
Smaller firms have fewer vacancies and rarely need to advertise as they receive sufficient speculative applications. To identify firms for speculative applications you can use the Law Society’s online directory of firms. Click on ‘more search options’ and check the training contract box. This database does not show actual vacancies but will give you contact details of firms which are authorised by the Law Society to take trainees.

www.solicitors-online.com

Do some research on the firm and send a targeted CV and covering letter. Some vacancies with smaller firms will also be advertised through our online vacancy service, My Career and websites such as LawCareers.Net – www.lawcareers.net and the Legal Aid Practitioners Group – www.lapg.co.uk

5. How do I find out about individual firms?
You can meet representatives from larger firms face-to-face at the Law Fair in October, campus presentations and workshops (mainly autumn term). See the events section on our website for full details.

www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/events

For smaller firms there will be less published information so you may be limited to their website and marketing brochure.

6. Getting a training contract seems very competitive – how do I maximise my chances?
As with any job application, research the firm thoroughly and ensure you can demonstrate genuine motivation to work for them. Give your applications plenty of time and effort so that you present a positive application reflecting your skills and achievements. Our team offers advice and information on applications and interviews is available.

www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/applications

7. Will working as a paralegal/legal assistant help me get a training contract?
It depends on the firm. Some larger firms have a separate paralegal recruitment path and make it clear that this is not an alternative route to a training contract. In smaller firms, building up legal experience through paralegal roles may be helpful. However, some firms may prefer to keep staff in paralegal roles than employing them as trainee solicitors.
8. Can international students apply for training contracts in England and Wales?
If you are a non-EEA national and require a work permit to work in the UK, then your options will be more restricted than EEA nationals. The larger international firms are usually willing to consider applicants who require a work permit and will value your international experience and language skills.

Firms will also require you to be able to write and speak perfect English as this is a key skill of a lawyer. If English is not your first language and you do not have excellent fluency, this may be a barrier to employment.

For alternative routes to legal qualifications, please look at Chartered Institute of Legal Executives – www.cilex.org.uk
Institute of Paralegals – www.instituteofparalegals.org

Becoming a barrister

After completion of the Bar Professional Training Course (BPTC) you will be called to the Bar at your Inn of Court and to practice as a barrister you will need to complete a one-year training period known as pupillage with a set of chambers. For further information on training as a barrister or borrow the book Bewigged and Bewildered? A guide to Becoming a Barrister in England and Wales available from Hallward Library.
The Bar Council – www.barcouncil.org.uk

1. How do I apply for a pupillage?
All pupillages are currently advertised through the Pupillage Gateway website. On this website you can browse a list of the pupillage providers in England and Wales, view chambers information, make an application for pupillage, find out how to apply to those chambers outside of the portal and find information on chambers offering mini-pupillages.
Pupillage Gateway – www.pupillagegateway.com

2. When should I apply for pupillage?
The Pupillage Portal operates just one season, which opens mid January in 2017. Each person is able to apply to up to 12 chambers. You need to tailor each application to the chamber you are applying to.

3. How do I find out about individual chambers?
Use the Pupillage Gateway as your starting point for links to further information on individual chambers. Chambers do not usually attend our Law Fair in large numbers but you can meet them at the National Pupillage Fair which is held in London each year around early March. Some individual barristers give career talks on campus as part of our events programme or events organised by the School of Law and the Bar Society.
Pupillage Gateway – www.pupillagegateway.com

4. How do I decide which Inn to join and when do I need to apply?
There are four Inns of Court. They are non-academic societies which provide collegiate and educational activities and support for barristers. They are also a source of scholarships for legal training.

All intending barristers must be a member of an Inn at the latest by the May prior to starting the BPTC. However, it is usually recommended that you join an Inn as soon as you know that you would like to become a barrister as you will have the opportunity to attend educational and social events with members of the profession.

The Inns provide similar facilities and you can only be a member of one of them so your decision will be down to personal preference. To find out about the Inns start with their websites:
Gray's Inn – www.graysinn.org.uk
Inner Temple – www.innertemple.org.uk
Lincoln’s Inn – www.lincolnsinn.org.uk
Middle Temple – www.middletemple.org.uk

5. How can I get relevant work experience?
Most chambers offer mini-pupillages (short work experience placements) or student visit events. Dates and deadlines for these vary but you can find details in the Pupillages Handbook. Other experience may be useful such as work in the law courts, with a firm of solicitors or working within the community legal services.

General law questions

1. Do law firms and chambers prefer applicants with law degrees over non-law subjects?
Not at all! For both professions about a third of the intake is from graduates with degrees other than law and some large commercial firms of solicitors recruit approximately 50:50 from law and non-law. Do use our resources and events to find out about the profession including the Law Fair, law firm presentations, careers directories and handouts to help you research the profession.

2. What are the chances of becoming a solicitor or barrister for a mature graduate or career changer?
The legal profession is a very competitive profession to get into for all applicants. Mature graduates and career changers have successfully entered the profession, perhaps building on skills from their earlier career (e.g. a former civil engineer moving into construction law or someone from a related profession such as the police or probation service changing direction).

You need to research the profession thoroughly and make sure you sell your relevant skills and experiences from your earlier career. Bear in mind, that investment of your time and money in legal training does not guarantee a training opportunity at the end of it.

3. What other opportunities are there for jobs related to the legal profession but not as a solicitor or barrister?
Other roles include:
• Legal executive
• Paralegal
• Barristers’ clerk
• Court service
• Police
• Probation service
• Legal publishing and regulatory bodies
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International issues

4. How can overseas qualified lawyers practise in England and Wales?

This will depend on where you have qualified. It may be possible to transfer or you may have to complete the conversion course and further training. Contact the Solicitors Regulation Authority www.sra.org.uk or Bar Council www.barcouncil.org.uk to check your individual situation.

5. If I have a law degree from outside the UK will I still have to do the conversion course?

Your degree is unlikely to be a qualifying law degree so you will usually have to do the conversion course followed by LPC or BPTC. However, if you are a qualified lawyer in your home jurisdiction you may be able to transfer. Check with the Solicitors Regulation Authority or Bar Council for more information.

Academic issues

6. What are my chances if I don’t meet the academic requirements stated by the recruiters?

Firms of solicitors and barristers’ chambers usually specify strong academic grades in their recruitment criteria.

If there is a mitigating reason why your academic grades were lower than expected or you have taken a different route through education (e.g. as a mature entrant), then you may need to explain this in your application and most recruiters will take this into account, particularly if your application is strong in other areas.

7. Most firms ask for a 2:1. If I have a 2:2 will doing a postgraduate degree and getting a good grade in this override the lower grade at undergraduate level?

Recruiters are looking for consistency in academic achievement and will still look at your undergraduate grade. Doing a postgraduate degree, while showing your commitment to developing yourself academically, will not necessarily make any difference in the recruiter’s selection decision.

Postgraduate study is a big investment of your time and money and you will still have legal training on top of that. Therefore, if your only reason for doing a postgraduate degree is to override an undergraduate result then you should think carefully before embarking on it.

Further information

If you can’t find the answer to your question in this leaflet we have a wide range of resources on our website. You can also book an appointment with a careers adviser through My Career.

www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/students