

FEATURE | 6 April 2014



Responsible law schools guide and advise their law students on what step to take next, not let them be led astray by unsuitable alternatives to qualification, says Paula Moffatt

The current crop of final year undergraduates is in a fix when it comes to deciding whether to embark upon a career in law. For those lucky few who get a training contract before leaving university, the transition to the Legal Practice Course (LPC) and from there to the work place will be seamless, often without the need to incur any further debt.

For those students who do not have a training contract (the majority) or who are contemplating a career at the Bar, the future is far less clear and they find themselves between a couple of rocks and a hard place. Should they: (a) undertake an expensive course (or courses, if they do the Graduate Diploma in Law conversion course first) and add to their undergraduate debt when they may never get a training contract at all; (b) try and find an alternative route to qualification; or (c) abandon their hopes of working in law at all?

Degree of confusion

At Nottingham Law School (NLS), we spend a lot of time and effort working with students and advising them on the best option for their particular circumstances. There is, however, a degree of confusion in the minds of students as to what options are actually available.

Recent media discussion of initiatives such as apprenticeships and the CILEx route to qualification has led students to think that these are realistic or appropriate alternatives to the LPC or the Bar Professional Training Course (BPTC). While the CILEx route may be appropriate for some, students nonetheless need to be aware that they will still have to undertake the LPC to gain entry to the solicitors' profession, even if they complete a certain level of 'on the job' legal training. They also need to understand that the apprenticeship scheme is directed at school leavers rather than undergraduates and that it is far from clear how apprenticeships will work in practice.

Gold standard

Recognising the difficulties that students face with these decisions, we encourage them to try to consider the kind of lawyer that they want to be and to reflect upon what they would really like to spend their time doing. It may be that there is a route to the kind of work that they want to do without doing the LPC or BPTC, but for the majority, these courses remain the gold standard as they provide the entry route into the regulated professions of solicitor and barrister. In

addition, the LPC and BPTC provide students with an excellent level of legal knowledge and a set of legal skills that will serve them well in any job whether inside or outside the legal sector.

Law schools providing the LPC and BPTC courses are often portrayed as villains on the grounds that they will take on any "no hoppers" simply to collect a juicy course fee. At NLS, we utterly reject this view as we spend significant time and effort on guiding and advising our students (both before they embark on our courses and while they are studying with us), as well as providing our students with a wide range of extra-curricular activities to help them develop the kinds of skills that they will need in legal practice.

We also consider that there is a serious disconnect between this view and the need for diversity within the legal professions. The judiciary, the Bar and the solicitors' profession all recognise that the Widening Participation cohort needs to be able to access legal education, since it is this group that is increasingly being excluded from entry to the professions. It is more likely than not that some of these students will fall within the category of apparent "no hoppers" - the very students that we ought to be trying to help the most.

Paula Moffatt is a qualified solicitor and currently teaches on the Graduate Diploma in Law and Legal Practice Courses at Nottingham Law School, Nottingham Trent University. She is the NTU Academic Lead for the Pathways to Law Programme in the East Midlands which is jointly delivered by Nottingham Law School, Nottingham Trent University and the School of Law at the University of Nottingham.

Any students seeking advice on whether to undertake the LPC or BPTC should visit our conference web

page: www.ntu.ac.uk/yourfuture.

ISSUE:

Vol 158 no 14 08-04-14