



The University of Edinburgh

Careers Service

Careers in the legal profession in England & Wales Frequently Asked Questions

This information sheet covers some of the key questions about a career in the legal profession in England and Wales. This information is particularly targeted at non-law students though much of the information is applicable to Scots law students considering converting to English Law. The information is correct to the best of our knowledge at the time of writing. Additional information and resources can be found on careers in the legal profession (Green folders, K section) and entry and training for the profession (Yellow folders) in the Careers Information Centres.

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Initial Legal Training

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To become a solicitor or barrister in England & Wales you need to complete the academic stage which is either a qualifying law degree or conversion course (CPE/Graduate Diploma in Law), followed by the practical/vocational stage: for solicitors the Legal Practice Course (LPC) and for barristers the Bar professional training course (BPTC). In addition to the sites mentioned below, you can find information about courses at the following websites: <http://targetjobs.co.uk/law>, www.prospects.ac.uk/law and www.lawcareers.net. 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 www.lawcabs.ac.uk which includes details of all the course providers. CAB do not have a closing date for GDL courses. Applications will be dealt with as they are fully submitted and institutions are notified weekly that the forms have been received. The application process opens at the beginning of October each year. All instructions about how to apply can be found on the website. For part-time courses you should apply directly to the relevant institution. Closing dates for these vary, and are often later in the year. Scots law students converting to English law immediately after their degree can usually gain exemptions from part of the CPE/GDL, and study part time

and/or via distance learning. Contact the Solicitors' Regulation Authority (SRA) or the Bar Standards Board for more details on exemptions, www.sra.org.uk or www.barstandardsboard.org.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?

There are no league tables for courses. All courses have to cover the same core elements and are approved by the Law Society and the Bar Council, therefore having to meet a certain standard. Some large city law firms have developed links with specific law schools where you will study if you secure a training contract with such a firm, on a 'bespoke' GDL often condensed into 6-7 months only. However, most employers do not generally mind where you do your conversion course, even if they are funding you. Therefore some factors to consider in choosing a course include: cost; whether you prefer a university law school or an independent college; location; facilities and resources; careers support; employer links; whether you want somewhere where you can continue on to the LPC or BPTC. Take advantage of Open Days and find out as much as possible about courses.

3. Some places offer LLB or Masters courses for non-law graduates, should I consider this as an alternative to the CPE/GDL?

Some institutions offer "senior status law degrees" such as MA Law or LLB for Graduates. These are usually two year courses which are qualifying law degrees. You will come out with an LLB or a Masters degree as opposed to a graduate diploma. This route may be of interest if you wish to study law in a bit more depth and over a longer period (CPE/GDL courses are intensive one year courses). It is an alternative way to complete the academic stage depending on your study preferences.

However, it is unlikely that employers will be any more interested in you with one of these degrees than with the CPE/GDL. If you are considering one of these degrees it is important that you check that it is a qualifying law degree. 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 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. However the courses are exactly the same and it is unlikely to make any difference as far as employers are concerned since they are interested that you have completed the requisite training, not what your qualification is called. You should make your decision based on the factors mentioned in Q3.

5. How much does the CPE/GDL cost and is funding available?

The latest figures show courses costing between £2,000 (part-time) to £9,500. If you have been offered a place as a trainee solicitor with one of the larger firms then they will usually pay this along with an amount for your maintenance. Smaller firms do not offer this financial support. The Law Society has some bursaries available (see www.lawsociety.org.uk) but many students self-fund through career development

loans, family help etc. For intending barristers, scholarships are available from the four Inns of Court (Q25) on a competitive basis, but again many students self-fund.

Legal Practice Course (LPC)

6. How do I apply for the LPC and when is the deadline?

For full-time courses you apply online through the Central Applications Board www.lawcabs.ac.uk from 1st October each year. CAB do not have a closing date for LPC courses. Applications will be dealt with as they are fully submitted. All instructions about how to apply and details of all the course providers can be found on the website. For part-time courses you should apply directly to the relevant institution.

7. How do I decide which is the best LPC course and does it matter which one I choose as far as employers are concerned?

If you are being funded by an employer (Q11) they will usually specify or recommend which LPC course you should do. All LPC courses have to be approved by the Law Society to meet certain standards. If you are self-funding you should consider factors such as: cost, location, what elective subjects are available, teaching methods, facilities and careers support. Attend Open Days or campus presentations where possible. The LPC is split into 2 stages, the first stage being the core subjects, and the second electives. It will be possible to study the two stages with different providers, or complete the electives whilst undertaking the training contract. It is yet to be seen how many students or firms opt for the changed format.

8. Should I start the LPC without having first secured a training contract?

Small and medium sized firms of solicitors often do not recruit trainees a long way ahead like the larger firms and will advertise their vacancies to those on LPC courses. Therefore a number of people successfully secure training contracts during or just after their LPC year. However each year there are more people completing the LPC course than there are training places so there is no guarantee that you will secure a position and you should be aware of this possibility. After the recent economic downturn the situation has become even more difficult. Be prepared to put time and effort into your job search and make use of the careers support provided by the institution.

9. Are deferred course place offers possible?

Course providers will generally be sympathetic to requests for deferral to the following year once you have been offered a place and if your circumstances have changed, but check with individual providers for full details. The Central Applications Board process only applies to the current year.

10. If I want to take a gap year should I do this before or after the LPC?

There is no fixed requirement but firms will usually prefer you to do your gap year first so that you go into your training contract from your LPC while it is still fresh in your mind. However there is currently no expiry date for the LPC.

11. How much does the LPC cost and is funding available?

The latest figures show courses costing from £8,500 to upwards of £14,750 (full time). If you have been offered a place as a trainee solicitor with one of the larger employers then they will usually pay this along with an amount for your maintenance. Smaller firms do not offer this financial support. The Law Society has some bursaries available (see www.lawsociety.org.uk) and a small number of legal aid firms offer training support but many students self-fund through career development loans, family help etc.

Bar Professional Training Course (BPTC)

12. How do I apply for the BPTC and what is the deadline?

You should apply online via www.barprofessionaltraining.org.uk which includes details of the course providers and full details of how to apply. The deadline is usually in January (applications open around November) for courses starting in autumn that year. There is a clearing system for later applications.

13. How much does the BPTC cost and is funding available?

The latest figures show full time courses costing between £12,000 and £18,000, depending on location. Some scholarships are available via competitive application from the four Inns of Court (Q25). Note that scholarship application deadlines are around November, i.e. before the BPTC Online deadline. Otherwise self-funding options include career development loans.

Becoming a Solicitor

After completion of the LPC (see Q6-11) 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 some new routes to qualification are being trialled by the Law Society in conjunction with some law firms and organisations, which aim to introduce more flexibility to the work-based learning stage. See www.lawsociety.org.uk for full information on how to become a solicitor.

14. 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 (available to take away from the Careers Service) and websites including:

- www.prospects.ac.uk/law
- www.lawcareers.net
- <http://targetjobs.co.uk/law>
- www.chambersstudent.co.uk
- [MyCareerHub](#) (search vacancies under Legal Services).

See Q17 regarding applying to smaller firms.

15. 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. Assuming that you are not taking a year out, non-law students should apply during their final year (note that some firms have earlier deadlines for non-law students). Scots law students should also apply during their final year. Smaller firms do not recruit so far ahead so deadlines will vary (see Q17).

16. How can I get relevant work experience?

Larger firms of solicitors offer structured, paid vacation schemes of 1-2 weeks with deadlines around January/February for summer schemes (vacancy sources see Q14). These may be restricted to penultimate year law and final year non-law students. The situation will vary for Scots law students, so check with firms you are interested in. Many larger city law firms also now offer Open or Insight days, which are another useful way of connecting with a potential employer. For smaller firms, work experience may be more informal unpaid experience or work shadowing obtained through direct approaches (see Q17). Volunteering experience may also be relevant depending on the area of law you wish to get into. Remember that law firms will value work experience from other areas so it is not necessary to fill your vacations exclusively with legal experience.

17. 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 www.lawsociety.org.uk/find-a-solicitor to search firms in a particular location. Do some research on the firm and send a targeted CV and covering letter. Some vacancies with smaller firms will be advertised through websites such as www.lawcareers.net and www.lapg.co.uk, the Legal Aid Practitioners Group's website.

18. How do I find out about individual firms?

You can meet representatives from larger English firms face to face at the Careers Fair in October, and campus presentations and workshops (mainly Semester 1). See the events section on [MyCareerHub](#) for details. Also for the larger firms there is a lot of information in law careers directories (collect free copies from the Careers Service) and on our website (see Legal Services section at www.ed.ac.uk/careers/occupations). For smaller firms there will be less published information so you may be limited to their website and/or marketing brochure.

19. Getting a training contract seems very competitive – how do I maximise my chances?

After the recent recession and with law firms having reduced the number of training contracts on offer, it is more important than ever to research firms thoroughly (see Q18) to 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 (advice and resources on applications and interviews is available from the Careers Service, and via our website www.ed.ac.uk/careers >CVs, Applications and Interviews or the Law School careers

web pages www.law.ed.ac.uk/careers > Careers & Employability > CVs applications and interviews).

20. 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. For further information see www.instituteofparalegals.org.

21. Can international students apply for training contracts in England & Wales?

If you are a non EEA national and would require a work permit to work in the UK, then your options will be more restricted than for 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 but other firms will not be able to consider you. Firms will also require you to be able to write and speak English perfectly as this is key to the role of a lawyer, so if English is not your first language and you do not have excellent fluency then this will also be a restriction.

Becoming a Barrister

After completion of the BPTC (Q12-13) you will need to complete a one year training period known as pupillage with a set of barristers chambers, after which you can practise as a barrister. You are “called to the Bar” following the BPTC and completion of a required number of education or dining events at one of the Inns of Court. See www.barstandardsboard.org.uk for further information on training as a barrister.

22. How do I apply for pupillage?

All pupillages are currently advertised through www.pupillagegateway.com. Pupillage Gateway operates just one season, which starts in March each year. Further information, including important dates, is set out in the Candidate Guidance section of the above website.

23. When should I apply for pupillage?

Most sets recruit 12 months ahead so Edinburgh graduates, both law and non-law, would normally apply during the CPE/GDL year. The Pupillage Gateway opens in March for applications. Some larger commercial sets may recruit two years ahead, requiring application during final year, so check individual deadlines.

24. How do I find out about individual chambers?

Use www.pupillagegateway.com as your starting point for links to further information on individual chambers. Chambers do not attend the Careers Fair but you can meet

them at the National Pupillage Fair which is held in London each year around early March.

25. 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 (Q13). 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. They all 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: www.graysinn.org.uk; www.innertemple.org.uk; www.lincolnsinn.org.uk; www.middletemple.org.uk.

26. 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” (at the Careers Service) and via www.pupillagegateway.com. Other experience may be useful such as work in the law courts or with a firm of solicitors, plus debating, mooting and public speaking.

General Law Careers Questions

27. 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 law and non-law. As a non-law student you may have fewer opportunities to find out about the profession within your school or department but use the Careers Service resources and events e.g. the Careers Fair, law firm presentations, takeaway careers directories and handouts to help you research the profession. You should also look out for the event “Law for non-law students”, delivered by a law firm and usually held in Semester 1 each year.

28. 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 (see previous sections) for all applicants, and competition during the current recession is particularly fierce. 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 though, that investment of your time and money in legal training does not guarantee a training opportunity at the end of it.

29. 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, Crown Prosecution Service, Legal Services Commission, Law Commission, Barristers' Clerk, Court Service, Police, Probation Service, legal publishing and regulatory bodies such as the Financial Services Authority. Further information on these can be found in the green section of the careers information centres, via our website www.ed.ac.uk/careers and the leaflet 'Career Choices with Law', available to download at www.ed.ac.uk/careers/occupations > Legal Services > Ancillary Legal Professions.

International issues

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

This will depend on where you have qualified. It may be possible to transfer via the Qualified Lawyer Transfer Scheme (QLTS) 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.

31. 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 (Q30). Check with the SRA or Bar Council if you are unsure.

Academic issues

32. 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 as strong intellectual skills are needed in the legal profession. 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. However, in a competitive recruitment market, academic grades lower than other applicants may be an obstacle.

33. 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. While doing a postgraduate degree will show your

commitment to developing yourself academically, it will not necessarily make any difference to 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.

If you can't find an answer to your question above, the Careers Service has a wide range of information resources on legal careers. You can ask a Careers Information Adviser at the Helpdesk or book an appointment through [MyCareerHub](#) to speak to a Careers Consultant. We will do our best to help you answer your question. In addition www.lawcareers.net has a Q&A section under "Oracle" covering a wide range of legal careers topics.



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