**Getting (Legal) Work Experience**

**The context**

 If you are studying for a Law degree with an eye to a career in law then it important that you do more than spend your time in lecture theatres and the library. Securing a place in the legal profession is notoriously competitive. Doing well in your studies is an important aspect of succeeding but it is by no means the only way in which you can ‘stand out’ from your peers and best prepare yourself for a career in the law. Also, remember that work experience is not just a box to be ticked but an opportunity for deep learning and reflection as well as an opportunity to put to use the skills that you have and to learn new one. Don’t be timid or afraid of the experience but do your best to embrace it! It is also a good way of discovering which aspects of the law interest you the most.

There are manifold of benefits to undertaking work experience and it is not the intention to rehearse those here. Instead, what follows is a brief summary of the sorts of experience that will give you insight into the world of law. The list is not exhaustive and any number of experiences (work or otherwise) that you undertake alongside your studies will support your development and give you new skills and knowledge.

The list below is intended to get you thinking about the different experiences that you may engage with in order to bolster and improve your skills and increase your employability.

**Vacation Schemes**

Vacation schemes are one of the two most recognisable forms of legal work experience. They are normally for a week or two weeks and involve working at a firm of solicitors. The large national and international firms will have a fairly rigid process and timescale for applying for vacation schemes. Smaller, local firms tend to be more flexible and may be open to a more direct approach via email.

Consider carefully how you might tailor your application for a vacation scheme to the particular firm and also to consider the work that they do and whether it might be of interest to you. Although falling under the umbrella term ‘vacation scheme’, there is no set format and each vacation scheme is likely to be different in relation to the work that you will observe. Some will involve sitting-in on client meetings; others may involve shadowing a partner; or participating in office life. The core of the experience is so that you can witness the realities of life as a solicitor.

If you do end up gaining experience in a larger firm or one with trainee solicitors then be sure to make the most of their experiences and discuss with them their route into the law. Vacation Schemes are a perfect opportunity to ask about the firm’s culture and to get to know what they may be looking for from potential trainees of the future.

It may also be that you do not feel that a particular firm or practice area is the right one for you as a result of taking a vacation scheme. Do not be downhearted is this is the case, it is all part of learning where you want to belong in what will be a significant part of your life in the future!

**Mini-pupillage**

The other most recognisable form of legal work experience is that of a mini-pupillage. These are similar to a vacation scheme in the sense that you will experience the working life of a legal practitioner but, in this case, it will be a barrister. Again, the process for application will vary quite considerably depending on the chambers in question and the work will also be varied depending what the barrister(s) whom you are shadowing are undertaking. It may involve sitting in on conferences or attending court.

Different sets of chambers will be focussed on different areas of work (e.g. commercial, family or crime) and it may be useful to experience more than one area so that you can call upon a range of experiences when applying for a full pupillage.

**Marshalling**

Marshalling is also a great way to see the legal system in action and experience new things and develop additional skills. Marshalling is a shadowing of a member of the judiciary. Although you will spend a lot of time in court observing live hearings, you will also get to see the other aspects of judicial life such as the preparation undertaken in advance of a trial or hearing.

The process of observing a trial from the bench as opposed to the desk of the barrister or the public gallery can feel quite different. By gaining the judicial perspective on case management and the administration of justice can be very valuable and rewarding.

The availability of marshalling in the lower tiers of the court structure varies but enquiring at your local Crown Court is most likely to produce results. The higher tiers of the court structure (with the far fewer justices) do not generally provide marshalling opportunities and, for example, the Supreme Court actively discourages applications.

**Citizens Advice (Bureau)**

Citizens Advice does what the name suggests and offers advice to citizen. The advice is free and available in over 300 locations in the United Kingdom. They provide advice on legal and money issues. They are charitable organisations and are often looking for volunteers.

The work of Citizens Advice is varied, as is the availability of different roles. If you have time available on a regular basis then you could volunteer on a long-term basis with the service. This will not only enrich your experience and allow you to develop and utilise your skills on a regular basis, it will also demonstrate your ability to commit long-term to a valuable cause. Exposure to emotionally challenging situations will also help you to develop your resilience. In addition, and something that should not be forgotten, you will be helping your fellow citizens with the very real challenges that they face.

**Free Representation Unit**

The Free Representation Unit (FRU) provides free legal representation to those appearing at tribunals concerning employment and social security matters. The places are limited (particularly, at this time, for employment matters) but the experience is rewarding and will give you the opportunity to develop a wide range of skills. Training is reserved for those at the later stages of their legal education (normally from the summer of your second year on an LLB). Volunteers must commit significant time to the FRU but they also gain significant experience.

The work includes case preparation and advocacy. In this way, the work of the FRU is of particular (but not exclusive) interest to those seeking a career at the Bar.

**Law Clinics and Law Centres**

Many universities have ‘Law Clinics’ where students can volunteer to work on real legal matters under the guidance of a qualified solicitor. As with all of these schemes and initiatives, the work and availability varies significantly. Some of the opportunities of Law Clinics (or Miscarriage of Justice projects) are built-in to Law School programmes of study as optional or core modules, while others adopt an approach that is outside of the formal curriculum.

Major residential hubs (e.g. large towns and cities) may also have Law Centres that provide similar opportunities.

**Non-legal work experience**

While the above is an indication of the sorts of legally-related roles that you may undertake, do not ignore the wealth of other experiences available to you. Law is, at present, a ‘graduate’ profession and there are certain skills and competences that are more generally applicable. These include communication, team-working, reflection and skills of critical analysis. These transferable skills can be gained from a wide variety of sources.

It may be that you have paid employment or play competitive sport, or undertake other hobbies that make you a rounded person. Be sure to keep a record of these experiences and to reflect (a professional development diary can help some people!) on the skills acquired and developed. Picking specific examples that demonstrate your competence will not only allow you to see your personal and professional development more clearly but will also allow you to communicate it with others.

**Useful resources**

• <https://www.lawcareers.net>

• <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk>

• <https://www.thefru.org.uk>

• <https://www.innocenceproject.org>

• <https://www.lawcentres.org.uk>

• <https://www.chambersstudent.co.uk/the-bar/a-career-at-the-bar>

• <https://www.legalcheek.com>

• <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/law-careers>

• <https://www.allaboutlaw.co.uk>

• <https://www.victimsupport.org.uk>