Early career work experience survey
Junior Lawyers Division (JLD)

Varied experience, ambitious career plans
Introduction

The Junior Lawyers Division (JLD) Early Career Work Experience Survey is by far the biggest survey into the careers of young lawyers conducted by the Law Society so far.

Our research shows that young lawyers are ambitious and that they are open to any opportunities that will allow them to have a rewarding career.

This report analyses the findings from August 2014 and compares them to the findings from early 2013. The survey attracted over 340 respondents in 2013 and over 630 in 2014.

The Law Society is very grateful to all young lawyers who gave up their time to respond to the survey.

"These findings suggest that JLD members are facing difficulties both financially and also in accessing genuine career opportunities in the legal market place. Furthermore, there is evidence of a worrying trend of long term unpaid work experience, with some placements lasting up to two years. I would urge the profession to re-evaluate the situation and ensure that they are not putting short-term commercial advantage above the development of future legal talent.

That said, there is also positive news in that the experience gained through paralegal work seems to be valuable both in terms of gaining a training contract and pursuing a legal career. Further, with the various regulatory changes underway and the introduction of new apprenticeship schemes, the market may be able to further assist junior members of the profession."

Sophia Dirir
Chair of the Junior Lawyers Division
Senior Solicitor at Action for Children

Summary of findings

The JLD's annual survey focuses on the experience of legal education and early career work of those who are new to the legal profession. It is important for the Division to understand these experiences as it campaigns on behalf of, and provides services for, LPC students, paralegals looking for training contracts, trainee solicitors, and solicitors up to five years qualified.

Cost of legal education

- 61% of respondents to the 2014 survey spent over £20,000 on their legal education with 38% spending at least £25,000. This is a significant increase from the survey carried out 18 months earlier when only 35% said they’ve spent more than £20,000.
- Most respondents relied not just on student loans but also on financial assistance from family members. 53% undertook work to fund their education.
- Women are more likely to spend more than men with 41% of female respondents spending at least £25,000 vs. 31% of men.
- Significant financial debt forced many to prioritise obtaining paid work experience over experience in preferred areas of law.

Work experience

- 79% had undertaken some kind of unpaid work experience.
- Main reasons for undertaking unpaid work included gaining more experience, having something to put on CV and making sure law was the right career choice.
- Over 70% had anticipated that unpaid work experience would help them find a training contract, but less than half thought their job prospects had been enhanced after the experience.
- 49% had undertaken paid work experience. Gaining a training contract and more experience were the two predominant reasons for undertaking paid work experience.
- Undertaking paralegal work is becoming an ever more common route into a legal career. The percentage of respondents who had done such work jumped from 45% in early 2013 to 60% in 2014.
Increasing cost of education

Most students incur debt as a result of a legal education

Obtaining the knowledge and skills that are required to become a successful lawyer required a significant investment, with lawyers-to-be very likely to spend over £25,000 or even £30,000. According to our survey, university education was the greatest source of respondents’ financial debt, with 75% saying that they had incurred debt through this form of higher education. The Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL) had also caused 16% of respondents to incur debt, although this was more common amongst those 25 years old and over, suggesting that the rises in tuition fees have prompted a greater career focus amongst those affected, and that fewer people are now studying other subjects at university before progressing to law.

The Legal Practice Course (LPC) was the second most common cause of debt, with half of respondents reporting that it had affected their finances. Those who had undertaken paralegal work were more likely to report incurring debt as a result of studying than those who had not. This may suggest that students who do not secure a training contract are turning to paralegal work to pay off their debts whilst exploring their options. It is also possible that respondents who receive less financial support from their family choose paralegal work.

The number of respondents who had incurred debt through university and the LPC has, however, fallen slightly from last year. Furthermore, those aged 35+ showed significantly lower chances of incurring debt through university (at least half the rate of younger respondents), suggesting that the advent, and subsequent rise, of tuition fees is largely to blame for the increase. This is supported by the fact that the 19-24 age bracket record significantly higher instances of incurring university debt (91% in 2014) than any other age group.

Women tend to incur more debt as a result of a legal education than men. 41% of female respondents spent at least £25,000 on their legal education vs. 31% of men. This is perhaps because of life events that prompt career breaks and further subsequent exams, or more likely because of the length and quality of education undertaken. This suggests women are trying to compensate for the pay gap which is still prevalent across male and female graduates in the UK through investing more in education.

The amount of debt is significant

The share of those who have personally spent over £20,000 on their legal education so far has almost doubled from 2013. Last year, 35% of respondents reported having spent more than £20,000 on their education, whereas the figure was 61% this year. Of these, 23% have spent up to £25,000, 27% have spent between £25-30k, and 11% have spent more than £30,000. Those who have spent the most – a few respondents cited figures of £90-£100,000 – were international students who have to pay higher fees in the UK and are likely to incur substantial costs related to travel and accommodation.

To pay fees incurred through education, respondents turned to three main sources: student loans cited by 67%, financial assistance from family members (64%) and jobs (53%). The other two main sources of financing were personal savings (e.g. redundancy payment or inheritance), or the individual’s firm.

This year saw a substantial decrease in the number of men taking out student loans (71% down to 58%), as well as a rise in the number of men relying on financial support from family members. This is possibly caused by younger men being able to secure a job and turning to the family with smaller financial expenses, or by lower wages. Over two thirds of respondents claimed that their debt burden had influenced the type of work experience they selected. Those with highest debt burden were also much more likely to undertake unpaid work experience possibly because their finances were taken care of by their families. Those who spent less on their education where also more likely to have undertaken paid work which suggests they were not able to afford expensive education and had to rely on their own job as the main source of financing.

How much do you estimate you personally have spent pursuing a legal career to date including debt (e.g. LPC fees / law degree)?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>£5,001-£15,000</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<td>£15,001-£20,000</td>
<td>16%</td>
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<tr>
<td>£20,001-£25,000</td>
<td>23%</td>
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<tr>
<td>More than £25,000</td>
<td>38%</td>
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Varied experience, ambitious career plans

Smaller firms struggle to retain young lawyers

27% of respondents who had not undertaken paid work experience were interested in joining a smaller practice, however willingness to work for a high street practice was much lower among those who have already gained some paid work experience. This perhaps suggests that smaller firms have to work harder to retain talent.

Young lawyers who have already undertaken paid work experience were much more likely to work, or desire to work, in medium sized firms and the magic circle, a pattern that is likely caused by employment, remuneration and development opportunities offered by those firms.

Legal aid work, as in the 2013 survey, was not very popular, with only 4% of respondents working, or interested in working, in the field.

Work and aspirations also differed by age bracket. As respondents’ age increased, they were more likely to seek work in a high street practice than in a medium-sized or magic circle firm. Respondents over 35 were much more likely to have done short bursts of unpaid experience – reflecting their study requirements – while the oldest respondents were most likely to have worked without pay for long durations.

These findings suggest that some law firms are relying on free labour without much thought towards its long-term impact on those they employ, or to the fact that they are potentially missing out on excellent candidates by not offering remuneration. They also suggest that respondents from non-privileged backgrounds have to overcome significant financial obstacles to gain access to some work placements.

Unpaid work doesn’t always improve employability

79% of respondents had undertaken some kind of unpaid work experience. Motivations for doing work experience frequently included gaining practical skills, having something to add to the CV and making sure law was the right career choice. 22% had been advised to undertake unpaid work by a careers adviser, compared to just 9% of those who did paid work experience which suggests that for those seeking paid work experience career advisers are an important source of information, or that advisers emphasise unpaid work opportunities.

The duration of work experience varied. 37% undertook less than a month’s work, 30% did between one and three months work, and 23% did over six months, with 3% of these doing more than two years. Young people are more likely to have done short bursts of unpaid experience – reflecting their study requirements – while the oldest respondents were most likely to have worked without pay for long durations.

During their unpaid work, 63% received some support towards their expenses such as lunch and travel. 37%, meanwhile, were never given anything towards the costs of being at work.

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Unpaid work doesn’t always improve employability (continued)

“It’s not just costs like travel but also accommodation, suitable work attire (suits are not cheap) and loss of earnings.”

Almost a third of respondents claimed that unpaid work experience put them further into debt, and several explained that they had had to pull out of this work when finances ran out, or had taken extra jobs to make it possible. Similar numbers also stated that the work experience had cut into their college work, and a quarter noted that the work was not related to what they wanted to do.

Why did you undertake the unpaid work experience?

(Please select all reasons that apply)

- To gain more experience: 91%
- To put on CV: 77%
- To help secure a training contract: 72%
- To make sure law was the right career choice: 48%
- Advised to by careers adviser: 22%
- Advised to by friend/family: 13%
- Advised to by other: 4%
- Unable to secure paid work: 0%
- Other: 5%
Unpaid work doesn’t always improve employability (continued)

“I felt that I did not benefit as much as I could have (from unpaid work experience). If I was given more substantial legal work I would have gained much more practical experience and this would have increased my chances of securing a paid job in the legal sector.”

The main reasons for deciding to undertake unpaid work experience included gaining more experience, having something to put on the CV and hoping to secure a training contract.

Although 49% of respondents found it consistently very useful, and 91% thought they had gained experience, there were many other – perhaps to be expected – comments about undertaking tedious or irrelevant tasks such as photocopying, and only 57% of people thought that they had learned new skills. This was particularly common among those who already had much experience in the workplace, especially those who were changing careers. Over 70% had anticipated that unpaid work experience would help them find a training contract, but less than half thought their job prospects had been enhanced after the experience.

Students prioritise pay over preferred areas of law to repay the debt

There were many instances of respondents claiming they could only undertake paid work experience because they would have been unable to make their debt repayments without some kind of income. This often led respondents into areas of law other than those they wished to pursue, with long term consequences for their employability and career path.

“Although my work experience gave me an insight into life in an office, the type of work that I was given (admin, reading files) did not help me decide whether a career in law was suited to me.”

Why did you undertake the paid work experience?

(Please select all reasons that apply)

- To gain more experience: 89%
- To help secure a training contract: 83%
- To put on CV: 60%
- To make sure law was the right career choice: 39%
- Could not afford unpaid work: 30%
- Advised to by friend/family: 9%
- Advised to by careers adviser: 9%
- Advised to by other: 4%
Students prioritise pay over preferred areas of law to repay the debt (continued)

82% stated that it made a difference that the placement was paid, and a much higher percentage than those in unpaid work (62%) found the experience consistently very useful. Gaining a training contract and more experience were the two predominant reasons for undertaking paid work experience, and satisfaction with outcomes such as new skills learned and contacts made was generally much higher than amongst those who did unpaid experience, suggesting that individuals who are paid have a higher perceived value within firms and are given greater opportunities and career investment. 44% were dissatisfied with the level of pay received, but only 6% stated that this got them further into debt.

“Students have prioritized pay over preferred areas of law to repay the debt. The majority found paid placements very useful, primarily for gaining a training contract and more experience. Satisfaction with outcomes was generally higher among those who were paid. However, a significant minority (44%) were dissatisfied with the pay they received, but this did not increase their debt significantly.”

Other ways to boost employability

Paralegal work

Undertaking paralegal work is becoming an increasingly common route into a legal career. The percentage of respondents who had done such work jumped from 45% in 2013 to 60% this year, with most ‘yes’ responses coming from those aged 25-34. 55% of these had done more than a year’s paralegal work, with the main reasons for engaging in the activity being:

- To gain more experience (84%)
- To help secure a training contract (77%)
- For the income (68%)
- A way into a law firm (56%)
- Could not get a training contract (45%)

“I would have loved to have gone into legal aid or human rights work, but the placements, and jobs, are usually unpaid. I therefore applied for commercial vac schemes.”

Other ways to boost employability (continued)

Older respondents participating in this survey were more likely to have struggled to secure a training contract, whilst the youngest were most likely to need a way into a law firm. Work was normally paid (slightly more likely if the respondent was male), although 41% were dissatisfied with the level of remuneration. Other expectations, such as gaining experience, were met, but only 54% stated that paralegalling had helped them to secure a training contract – something most common amongst those aged 35+. Although 37% perceived no disadvantages to paralegal work, 44% felt that their career was not progressing during their time of employment.

“In one paralegal role, I did more admin work than I expected. At my job interview I was told that I would be doing case work and assisting solicitors, but I did not do as much case work as I wanted. At my interview, I was also told that my role could lead to a training contract. I was unsupported in my role, and the firm refused to discuss any progression opportunities with me. However, I did undertake some case work and built some contacts.”

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“I would have loved to have gone into legal aid or human rights work, but the placements, and jobs, are usually unpaid. I therefore applied for commercial vac schemes.”

“I paralegalled at the firm I am now training with. Great to get to know the firm / people before I started my training contract. Also learnt a lot of new skills.”
Voluntary work for non-commercial organisations

Over three fifths of respondents had carried out voluntary work for non-commercial organisations, with the percentage of women volunteers higher than that of men. Duration of work varied, but older people were likely to have done it for longer. 65% found it useful to their legal career. Although 58% of people said that they did it due to a passion for the cause, over half stated that they needed work experience, and 71% undertook voluntary work with a view to expanding their CV. Volunteer work was generally found to have been useful for experience, but 38% stated it diminished the amount of time they had for college work. This was a particularly common problem amongst 19-24 year olds.

Overall

Men found paid legal work experience to have been the thing that made the biggest difference to their employability, whilst women and under 25s found unpaid legal work experience of most benefit. Those who had undertaken paralegal work were much more likely to value paralegalling experience over voluntary work. Few people saw unpaid non-legal work experience as the biggest contributor to employability, with many of those that did in the youngest age bracket.

Methodology

Quantitative research was conducted with members of the Junior Lawyers Division in early 2013 and summer 2014.

For further details about this research please contact:

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Junior Lawyers Division

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