

POSTGRADUATE LEGAL EDUCATION IN BRITAIN

Sol Picciotto

There are many advantages for a law graduate to pursuing a period of advanced study of legal problems and issues abroad. Colleges and Universities in other countries may be able to offer tuition or facilities in specialised topics, or may offer new approaches to legal issues, which can stimulate the student and enable him or her to return home with new ideas. Postgraduate legal education can therefore be very useful whether you are intending to become a law teacher yourself, or go into practice, or into government service.

The basic requirement for entry into postgraduate courses is a good honours degree from a University or College with an international standing, plus a good knowledge of English. It is vital for the student as well as the University to ensure that this necessary educational background has been achieved. Nothing is more disappointing than to embark on a course and find that you are badly prepared for it. You can waste a lot of time and money trying, sometimes too late, to remedy a deficiency in your basic education.

LAW IN SOCIAL CONTEXT

A growing number of law school have come to emphasise the study of law not merely as the memorisation of legal rules, but as the understanding of how law structures social conflict and social behaviour. This can be applied and developed in relation to a wide number of legal fields, including labour law, legal history, social welfare law, housing and property law – almost every branch.

Pioneers in this approach have been the newer Universities of Warwick and Kent, and others have also established strong reputations in this approach. Sheffield offers a Socio-Legal Studies programme, and similar studies are available at Universities such as Edinburgh and Cardiff and Polytechnics such as Middlesex, and South bank, both in London. Oxford has the Centre for Sicio-Legal Studies founded by the Social Science Research Council, which has specialised recently in law and economics research.

Whatever topic or approach you are interested in, you should make sure your information on the College or University of your choice is up-to-date. Courses can change, and people can move from one year to the next. Make sure you get an up-to-date staff list, find out what you can about the interests of the staff, and make sure they will be there when you go.

TAUGHT COURSES OR RESEARCH

Assuming you have the basic qualifications, you must then consider what combination of research and taught courses will best suit you, having regard to your own temperament as well as the field of study you have chosen. All graduate work involves the student doing individual research; but it is rare for a student to embark on a pure research thesis straight away. It is usually essential to follow some courses at postgraduate level. These can either be combined with a dissertation, or used as a basis to continue later with a larger thesis. Some taught postgraduate courses are also designed to provide a satisfying programme in themselves. Initial postgraduate law degrees, normally with a taught course element in them, are usually designated LL.M. (Master of Laws), although other designations are also used, such as M.Phil., or M.Sc. In addition, some Universities offer specialised Diplomas.

Most British Universities, and several Polytechnics, offer a graduate programme of some sort, although the form of teaching and the topics offered depend on the number of staff they have, and their specialisations. The biggest graduate programme is offered by the University of London, through its constituent Colleges. Its LL.M. programme requires a student to take 4 taught courses in 12 months. Since a student registered in any of the Colleges may take courses offered in all of them, this provides a very wide range of choice: currently some 90 courses are offered in the LL.M. However, this could involve you in a lot of travelling, so it is best to be based in the College which covers your main interests. The wide range of courses offered is to some extent offset by the large size of classes in some cases, and the relatively impersonal character of the tuition.

In contrast, most other Universities depend on the particular specialisms of their individual staff. In such cases, a course may be no more than a series of supervisions or tutorials, in which perhaps no more than two or three graduates may be involved with a single teacher. Where a Law Department or Faculty specialises, or offers a special programme, numbers may rise to 6 to 10 or 12.

If you have a special interest, it is a good idea for you to try to make sure that the particular member of staff who specialises in that area will be available in the year in which you wish to study. Next, you need to try to find out whether the Faculty you apply to covers that specialisation, and has adequate library facilities.

SPECIALISATIONS

In some places specialisations are established around a Centre or Institute which groups staff and students. Thus the well-known Institute of Criminology at Cambridge University offers a demanding but interesting M.Phil., course in criminology, which includes social science aspects as well as law. Exeter has its Centre for European Legal Studies, and offers LL.M. courses in both European and International Business Legal Studies.

Several law faculties specialise in aspects of the law of the sea or marine resources. UWIST (University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology) offers courses on coastal zone management law and maritime law; Southampton on shipping and international commercial law, and Hull on maritime law. Dundee offers a Diploma in petroleum law, which covers the law relating to energy resources generally.

Some courses are specifically geared to the needs of students from developing countries and are taught by staff who come from such countries or have experience of their problems. The law department of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) offers a long-established programme in African law, as part of the London University structure. At the University of Warwick there is a Law in development programme, which covers both the general problems of law in relation to social and economic development, as well as specific courses in Public Enterprise law and Urban Law.

Many overseas students come to Britain to pursue courses in international law, or international economic law. Several universities specialise in the former, including the oldest, Oxford and Cambridge, as well as Manchester, Keele and others.