

Why study Law at University if I want to become a lawyer?

If you are thinking that you might eventually wish to pursue a career as a lawyer, whether a solicitor or a barrister, there are two different ways of getting the necessary qualifications. One is to study any subject at University other than Law, then do a one-year Law conversion course and finally complete the relevant vocational course to become a solicitor or a barrister. The other route is to study Law at University, typically for three years, and then take the relevant vocational course.

There are various myths about which route you should adopt. One myth is that employers prefer applicants who have not studied Law at University. That is simply not the case. Statistics indicate that half the successful applicants to the legal profession have taken the conversion course and the other half have studied Law at University. Studying a subject other than Law and then taking the conversion course is a perfectly legitimate route to become a lawyer. But so is studying Law at University. If you are unsure which route to take, then one factor to bear in mind is that if you really enjoy one of the subjects you are studying at school and wish to study it at University, then do so. Studying that subject will not bar your route to becoming a practising lawyer and it is likely to enable you to develop skills which will be of benefit to work as a lawyer. But studying Law at University will also enable you to acquire knowledge and develop skills which will be of real benefit to your future career as a lawyer and indeed many other professions as well. So what are the advantages of studying Law at University generally and studying Law at Cambridge specifically?

1. Breadth and depth of knowledge

At Cambridge most Law students study 14 papers over three years. Seven of these are the foundation papers which must be taken if you wish to become a practising lawyer. These papers are studied in a conversion course, but concentrated within the space of one year. At Cambridge the foundation papers are studied in detail throughout the three year course, but seven other papers are studied as well. This means that you can choose to study a wide variety of subjects, ranging from Legal History to Philosophy, from Commercial Law to Criminology, from Family Law to International Law, and many other subjects as well. Consequently, studying Law at University enables you to gain depth and breadth in your understanding of the law, which cannot be acquired during a law conversion course, and also enables you to see how different legal subjects fit together.

2. Learning to think like a lawyer

Being able to study law in three years gives you the chance to develop your ability to think and write like a lawyer, to use and understand technical vocabulary, to apply the law to resolve difficult problems and to analyse and engage with a wide variety of legal arguments. The advantage of the small group teaching system at Cambridge means that you get a great deal of support from your teachers in being able to think and analyse the law. You also get a great deal of support in developing legal writing skills. Thinking and writing about the law

are not skills which necessarily come naturally, but which take time to develop through practice. Being able to study Law in three years gives you the opportunity to develop those skills.

3. *Encouraging critical engagement*

Studying Law at University means that you are studying Law as an academic subject. It follows that you are encouraged to reflect on the law, to think critically about the law, to consider whether the law is satisfactory, to identify the policies which underpin particular rules and to suggest alternatives. This often requires you to engage with other academic disciplines, such as economics, social policy, history and philosophy. There are also opportunities to study Law in another European country and so gain the benefit of developing language skills and to see how law is applied and developed in a different legal system. Having studied a Law degree might also enable you to pursue postgraduate legal studies either in Cambridge, for example on the LL.M. or MCL, at another UK university or at a university abroad, such as a US law school like Harvard, which is generally not possible without a Law degree.

4. *Developing other legal skills*

Studying Law at University also enables you to develop other skills and gain other experiences which will be of real benefit to a future career as a lawyer. For example, it is possible to participate in mooting competitions and so gain experience of presenting a legal argument in front of a judge, or to participate in *pro bono* work and provide legal support to real people facing real problems.

5. *Cost*

Finally, by studying Law at Cambridge in three years and then proceeding to obtain professional qualification means that you can become a practising lawyer without needing to do the conversion course, because you will already have studied the seven foundation subjects as part of your Law course. This means that you do not need to pay for an additional year of study.

A significant number of people who study Law at Cambridge do not become practising lawyers, and even some who do then move on to other careers, including business, politics, the civil service, banking, journalism, in international organisations or the voluntary sector and academia. Also, if you are interested in studying a subject other than Law at Cambridge, you can often change to Law at the end of your first or second year and study Law at Cambridge for two years, during which you study 10 papers, seven of which are the foundation subjects. But most people who study Law at Cambridge take the three year course and then proceed to become a practising lawyer. They find that the knowledge and skills they have acquired during their University legal studies are of real benefit to their future career. As Jonathan Hirst QC, a leading barrister and former Chairman of the Bar, has said:

"In my view, pupils who have done an undergraduate law degree start with a very considerable advantage over those who have tried to cram in everything in less than a year. A Law degree allows a student to gain a broader and more mature understanding of the subject."