

The importance of ‘acting yourself into new ways of thinking’: preliminary findings on the impact of embedding workplace experiences in law degrees to positively impact student skills growth, degree results and employment outcomes before and during a global pandemic

Christina Perry*  and Nigel Spencer

Queen Mary University of London, London, UK

*Corresponding author email: c.perry@qmul.ac.uk

(Accepted 17 April 2023)

Abstract

The paper reports the findings of over a decade of pioneering, award-winning fieldwork which has explored how workplace experience, if embedded successfully in different stages of legal education, can accelerate the ‘speed to capability’ and skills development of early career lawyers. The benefits from initial experiments of graduate-level work placements carried out by the authors since 2008 are presented. The paper then explores the findings from almost 10 years of creating year-long work placements for law undergraduates, assessing student skill growth, and the impact of the work placements on degree results and employment outcomes, before and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: legal education; practice; profession and ethics; law placements; work experience

Introduction and context

(a) Primary research focus and questions

In this paper, our aim is to look at how legal education in a university context can best evolve to support those law students who would like to develop careers as legal practitioners, preparing these individuals for an increasingly broad range of available career paths. In particular, we have focused on students’ ability to build the knowledge, skills and mindsets needed for a fast-evolving world of legal practice, at a time when there is significant change in the sector. Deregulation in the legal sector in England and Wales has led to an increasing number of new business models amongst legal service providers and many different types of legal jobs, skills needs and career routes. In addition, after a detailed review of legal training,¹ the regulatory body of solicitors, the Solicitors Regulation Authority, has now redefined the pathway, examinations and related competencies required to qualify as a solicitor in England and Wales, introducing the two-stage Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE).²

¹See Dame J Gaymer DBE and QC (Hon) and M Potter *The Final Report of the Legal Education and Training Review Independent Research Team. Setting Standards: the Future of Legal Services Education and Training Regulation in England and Wales* (June 2013) available at <https://letr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/LETR-Report.pdf>.

²See <https://www.sra.org.uk/become-solicitor/admission/pathways-qualification/solicitors-qualifying-examination/>.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Society of Legal Scholars. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

Our overall research question is to explore how legal education models in universities can be evolved by reviewing the outcomes of a number of experimental approaches to degree-based legal education explored by the present authors in their research and fieldwork since 2008. Specifically, the paper will review the impact of the ‘placement year’ law degree model at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) School of Law from 2014 on student skills growth, degree results and employment outcomes. As part of the study, we review the research question of how well this workplace-focused educational model worked through the Covid-19 pandemic, during the switch to remote (and hybrid) working across legal sector employers. The specific research questions examined are:

- 1 Does a ‘year in industry’ placement positively impact students in terms of skill development, and, if so, how?
- 2 Were any benefits to students from the ‘year in industry’ placement impacted negatively by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the need to switch to (largely) remote working patterns?
- 3 Can the bringing forward of the first workplace experience of students to the undergraduate phase accelerate development and performance levels in the workplace?
- 4 Did the placement year improve a student’s substantive legal knowledge, as evidenced by their marks in the fourth year, and their degree classification?
- 5 Did the placement year enable students to achieve graduate-level employment outcomes?

(b) The rapidly-evolving legal services context – and the consequent challenges of designing law degrees to support future practitioners

To consider the question of what type of law degree education will best support those seeking to become legal practitioners of the future, it is important to look briefly at the fast-moving legal sector employment context.

First, in terms of legal services provision itself within the UK market, this has changed rapidly due to deregulation, since the Legal Services Act 2007 opened up the opportunity for more varied forms of service provision and service provider ownership structures. Following these changes, a wide variety of employers and job roles now exist. The new graduate career pathways available require different skill sets and qualifications, ranging from more traditional solicitor routes to roles in legal operations, technology services, project and knowledge management.³ Many of these different pathways also come with broader choices in the nature of the employment relationship (including employed, self-employed, or consultancy models).⁴

Within this *market* context of changing legal job roles and more varied career paths, legal education in the UK has also seen a number of fundamental changes (including regulatory ones), meaning that the major providers of programmes, and employers in the sector, need to reassess their approach to legal education with respect to students wishing to engage in legal practice. In tertiary-level education alone (at undergraduate level, or its equivalent) there are now a range of routes available including the long-established LLB university degree model, ‘Trailblazer’/degree apprenticeships, and accelerated law

³For discussions of lawyer skill sets, see N Spencer and S Newton *Early Career Pathways; Strategic Learning & Development in Professional Services (Paper 3)* (Saïd Business School & Meridian West, 2018); A Smith and N Spencer ‘Do lawyers need to learn to code? A practitioner perspective on the “poly-technic” future of legal education’ in C Denvir (ed) *Modernising Legal Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019) p 18; A Curphey *The Legal Team of the Future: Law+ Skills* (London: London Publishing Partnership, 2022). See also Dan Kayne’s ‘O-Shaped’ lawyer initiative at <https://oshaped.com/>.

⁴In the last two to three years an increasing number of pathways were added to more traditional routes towards solicitor qualification in England and Wales, including graduate schemes in Legal Operations. See <https://www.nortonrosefulbright.com/en-gb/careers/graduates/business-and-legal-operations-graduate-scheme>. There are also more flexible employment platforms, especially for more experienced lawyers (eg Axiom, available at <https://www.axiomlaw.com/>), or platforms at firms such as Allen & Overy, available at <https://www.peerpoint.com/>, or Pinsent Masons, available at <https://www.pinsentmasons.com/solutions/vario>). See also K Dowell ‘Platform firm growth is outstripping traditional firms’ *Horizon by The Lawyer* (16 September 2022).

degrees from private providers (to name just three options).⁵ These different models are increasingly aimed at broadening access to the profession so that there are options to ‘earn whilst you learn’ at the tertiary education level.

The new SQE (mentioned above), now being introduced gradually across the sector in England and Wales, is also acting as a regulatory accelerator of educational changes at a sector level. The introduction of this new examination means that there are now changes to the educational requirements for qualification as a solicitor in England and Wales, leading to the reshaping of the previous models of graduate practitioner education for future solicitors (eg the Legal Practice Course, or LPC). Employers are gradually adopting the SRA’s new qualification route for their future lawyers and deciding on the precise format of the learning courses related to this SQE qualification which they will create (ie what course will they create for their future employees to replace the LPC).⁶ In addition, employers are also considering how they might change their approach to the long-established two-year period of solicitor ‘traineeship’, given the opportunities for more flexibility with the SRA’s new SQE-related requirement for a two-year period of ‘qualifying work experience’ (QWE) before lawyers can qualify as solicitors in England and Wales.

This complex and rapidly-shifting regulatory context therefore raises the issue of higher education’s role and purpose, at least the part of its purpose which relates to preparing students who wish to develop careers in the legal services market. Specifically, with so much change in the legal services’ marketplace, we consider that an important question for university law schools becomes: what changes and reassessments should we be considering in the format, content and learning methods of our degrees so that the individuals graduating from these educational courses will be well equipped to succeed in the new legal services market reality?

This question has many elements to it, and a full answer to it is beyond the scope of this paper. In particular, this question raises the issue of the perceived tension between academics, who are seen to prefer a more knowledge-focused legal education, and practitioners, whose focus is on the skills required for legal practice.⁷ We consider that an improvement in skills can go hand in hand with an improvement in substantive knowledge, and this perceived desire to focus on one aspect or the other is a false dichotomy. This is particularly the case where, as here, the placement year is an additional element embedded within the traditional three-year LLB degree and does not remove an individual student’s ability to choose elective modules as part of their degree, whether outside of the sphere of commercial law generally or with a social justice element specifically. In addition, this model requires a considerable investment of time and resources on the part of both the university and the employers in question, for the benefit of a relatively small number of students. These students tend to be self-selecting as students who are interested in becoming practising lawyers.

For the purposes of this current contribution, we seek to focus specifically on the issue mentioned of learning *methods*, in other words the ‘how’ of university legal education. In doing so, we will seek to explain why we have developed a shared philosophy that deep learning *through practical experience*

⁵In addition to LLB programmes at UK universities, the wide range of undergraduate, masters and apprentice pathways (see <https://www.law.ac.uk/study/apprenticeships/>) can be seen at private education providers (eg the University of Law, available at <https://www.law.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/law/>).

⁶As the first cohorts of future England and Wales solicitors take the new SQE qualification path, established providers of graduate legal qualifications (eg the Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL) and the Legal Practice Course (LPC)) are creating ‘SQE Preparation Courses’. Larger law firms partnering with these providers are creating SQE1 and SQE2 preparation courses. Often these are completed in advance of the two-years of ‘Qualifying Work Experience’ now required, meaning that the structure is similar to previous approaches. There are exceptions, however: Reed Smith, working with BARBRI/the College of Legal Practice, has experimented with a more integrated approach, embedding periods of work-based learning into their SQE courses, see A Hussain ‘Reed Smith signs SQE training deal with BARBRI and College of Legal Practice’ (Legal Cheek, 4 November 2020), available at <https://www.legalcheek.com/2020/11/reed-smith-signs-sqe-training-deal-with-barbri-and-college-of-legal-practice/>.

⁷See the 2013 Legal Education and Training Review *LETR – Legal Education and Training Review* (accessed 16 May 2023); J Guth and C Ashford ‘The Legal Education and Training Review: regulating socio-legal and liberal legal education?’ (2014) 48(1) *The Law Teacher* 5.

should be an important element of the higher education experience for future legal practitioners, in effect ‘collapsing the distance between the classroom and the workplace’.⁸

The main body of the paper below will review academic research on the impact of workplace experience in degree education and also summarise the experiments we carried out in embedding periods of workplace experience into degrees (including during the Covid-19 pandemic). For the different initiatives we will review the impact (and benefits) we have seen on the skills, mindsets and behaviours of students, and performance data taken from employers where students were embedded in the workplace. The conclusions we reach are inevitably preliminary at this stage, pending further generations of students moving through the various programmes we have created. However, we believe that the results so far highlight some important trends which, we hope, can be helpful in guiding future educational innovations.

(c) The importance of ‘skill-building’ as well as ‘knowledge-building’

In our analysis of the different learning methods, we would emphasise the importance of achieving a balance between both ‘knowledge-building’ and ‘skill-building’. In terms of ‘skill-building’, our belief is that, for future legal practitioners to take advantage of the broader range of career paths now open to them (noted above), and to enable them to participate fully as legal practitioners, they will need to leave their educational world with a correspondingly broader set of skills than was the case for the previous generation of practising solicitors. These individuals will need to be more flexible, open to evolving their professional identities throughout their careers, potentially holding roles which do not include the word ‘lawyer’ in the job title, and be confident enough to experiment with these different career paths, roles and identities.

As will be clear from the work we have carried out over a number of years and summarised below, we believe that building these broader skill sets (and mindsets) in young lawyers, and giving them the confidence to try new roles and identities, is not possible without giving them the opportunity to ‘act themselves into new ways of thinking’ through deeply experiential education. It is *not* our experience that the opposite happens: that bright law students (or the highly cognitive legal professionals they then become) ‘think themselves into new ways of acting’. We suggest, therefore, that the tertiary-level educational experience for future practitioners needs to be one where there is, whenever possible, almost a ‘permeable membrane’ allowing in the outside (fast-changing) world of professional practice to the students’ educational environment so that there are ‘learning by doing’ opportunities offered as part of their educational development: opportunities which allow them to experiment in low-risk environments, and build the professional skills required for the emerging areas of practice.

We feel that this approach can have benefits for different stakeholders. Not only the students (future practitioners) themselves, but such in-depth opportunities to build skill (alongside substantive legal knowledge) before entering the workplace fully might redress the opinions of some law firm customers who indicated previously that they would no longer pay for the time of junior lawyers on their mandates: an opinion which could be taken, at least in part, as a perception of the value being delivered by the more traditional ‘knowledge-heavy – skill-light’ early career solicitors they had encountered historically in their dealings with law firms.⁹

We emphasise again that the above emphasis on ‘skill-building’ is not intended to deny the importance of the core knowledge-building role of law degrees. As Richard Susskind famously said,¹⁰ the ‘twist in the tale’ of change in the legal profession is that the core knowledge base of legal frameworks

⁸N Spencer ‘Creating the “lawyer of the future” in times of disruption: the power of building a new world of on-going, workplace-focused education’ (24 April 2019), available at <https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/unlocking-potential-artificial-intelligence-english-law/blog/2019/04/creating-lawyer-future-times>.

⁹A Ward and A Berry ‘Deutsche Bank to refuse to pay for trainees and NQ lawyers after panel overhaul’ (Legal Week, 21 March 2017), available at <https://www.law.com/international-edition/2017/03/21/deutsche-bank-to-refuse-to-pay-for-trainees-and-nq-lawyers-after-panel-overhaul/>.

¹⁰R Susskind *Tomorrow’s Lawyers: An Introduction to Your Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) pp 118–120.

will still need to be built, even if the knowledge is being increasingly commoditised. Our experience is that, during all the workplace experiments we have carried out, the students have always needed this core knowledge base to apply to the practical tasks in the legal practice work environments they were placed within. Without such knowledge and legal frames of thinking, they would not have been able to contribute effectively to their work environments. However, we do believe that higher education could usefully enhance the ‘skills’ component of its offering through workplace experiences, and this has been the focus of our work as set out below.

1. Prior research into the benefits of work experience in Higher Education

Despite the relative lack of any workplace-focused law degrees in Russell Group universities to date, the concept of including work experience within higher education has a long history. Both the Dearing Report¹¹ and the Wilson Report¹² included recommendations for connecting higher education with work experience, and models such as placement degrees or ‘years in industry’ have been commonly used across different subject areas in universities for many years.

Academic research into the impact of educational methods which offer the opportunity for skills application in the workplace has indicated benefits both academically and in employment outcomes, although research also noted that there is a need for all stakeholders to understand the benefits of such opportunities in order to overcome barriers of perception in undertaking work placements.¹³ Benefits noted in previous research included that students taking undergraduate work placements show greater academic improvement than those who do not,¹⁴ with the same study also indicating that there were consistent academic benefits from placement experiences, regardless of ethnicity, gender, socio-economic background and subject.¹⁵ This latter benefit also was found in the study of Moores, Birdi and Higson, which indicated that placement work experience may mitigate lower achievement levels of Black and Asian (compared to white) students at university.¹⁶ With respect to law students specifically, the evidence indicates that students from Black and minority ethnic and lower socio-economic backgrounds struggle in terms of obtaining both work experience opportunities whilst at university, and legal employment following university.¹⁷ We considered that it was of significant importance therefore to provide these opportunities to students at QMUL, which has 75% of its students from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds and 49% of its students as the first in their families to enter higher education.

In terms of academic results, studies have also indicated that completing a ‘sandwich’ work placement is associated with improved academic performance in the final year of study.¹⁸ Regarding career outcomes, research has indicated that placement students are more likely to secure appropriate graduate-level work and higher starting salaries upon completion of their degree in comparison to

¹¹R Dearing ‘Higher Education in the learning society: report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education’ (Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1997).

¹²T Wilson ‘A review of business-university collaboration’ (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012), available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32383/12-610-wilson-review-business-university-collaboration.pdf.

¹³M E Balta et al ‘Motivations and barriers in undergraduate students’ decisions to enroll in placement courses in the UK’ (2012) 8 *Journal of International Education Research* 399.

¹⁴EJ Moores and PA Reddy ‘No regrets? Measuring the career benefits of a psychology placement year’ (2012) 37 *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 535.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶E Moores et al ‘Placement work experience may mitigate lower achievement levels of Black and Asian vs. White students at university’ (2017) 8:1518 *Frontiers in Psychology*.

¹⁷H Sommerlad et al ‘Diversity in the legal profession in England and Wales: a qualitative study of barriers and individual choices’ (Legal Services Board, 2010).

¹⁸R Brooks and PL Youngson ‘Undergraduate work placements: an analysis of the effects on career progression’ (2014) 41(9) *Studies in Higher Education* 1563.

non-placement students.¹⁹ It is also suggested that the benefits of a placement year may continue up to six years post-graduation.²⁰

There is also a wide range of literature exploring the impact of ‘clinical legal education’ (CLE) more broadly. CLE takes many forms, both in terms of external work placements such as those discussed in this paper, as well as law clinics within law schools, and/or clinical modules involving scenario-based learning. Brayne et al consider that CLE ‘is not an end in itself but a means by which the law and the legal process can be understood’.²¹ Vaughan et al agree with this perspective, and consider that CLE might sit ‘alongside the panoply of methodologies (doctrinal; socio-legal; comparative, etc) that can be brought to bear with the law’.²² They also consider that CLE is ‘the learning of the law and its implementation in the real world through action and reflection that has educational, public interest and employability benefits’.²³ The placement year discussed in this paper falls within this general definition of CLE.

One key distinction between the generally-recognised conception of CLE and the placement year discussed in this paper is that the work in these placements is often not ‘pro bono’ work. The employers pay the students for their work (at or above the London Living Wage) and, for students in law firms, it is anticipated that at least some of that work will be charged to the firm’s clients. It has been posited that the purpose of legal education is to educate and that a CLE clinic is an ‘educational tool’ that can provide students with learning that can, but does not necessarily have to, include social justice elements.²⁴ We agree with this proposition. We consider that a focus on social justice can, and indeed ought to, form part of the legal education of the majority of law students. However, we do not consider that the presence of a placement year such as that which we have introduced would prevent or inhibit the students taking part in it from developing a sense of ethics or social justice. Students who undertook placement years often became heavily involved with pro bono projects at their employer (and QMUL’s Legal Advice Centre), and have spoken very highly about such experiences (see Appendix 1). With respect to both social justice and ethics, dilemmas that may have seemed remote to students when being taught in a traditional academic way, often seem more vivid and immediate when presented in the context of the workplace.

We review a number of these aspects below in the context of our own work, including results in different academic years and employment outcomes, and also add a number of observations on the skills built from our own placement approaches, together with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on placement structures.

2. Early experiments in ‘collapsing the distance between the classroom and the workplace’, and our learning from those exercises

To give context, it is important to explain the sequence of our experimentation with different models of embedding work experience into educational programmes, in particular degree models. We will summarise how this work then led us to create a full ‘placement year’ LLB offering for undergraduate students, and our findings from implementing this placement degree. For each step or ‘experiment’, we will summarise what was tried, our learning from the approach(es), and also how each phase led us on to further experiments where we tried to take the benefits we had found in previous approaches and evolve them further. This was very much an iterative journey, where we started with various hypotheses and reasons for each experiment, and then adapted our subsequent approach(es) based on the findings at each stage.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰PA Reddy and E Moores ‘Placement year academic benefit revisited: effects of demographics, prior achievement and degree programme’ (2011) 17(2) *Teaching in Higher Education* 153.

²¹H Brayne et al *Clinical Legal Education: Active Learning in Your Law School* (Oxford: Blackstone Press, 1998) p 2.

²²S Vaughan et al ‘Clinical legal education reimaged’ in L Thomas et al (eds) *Reimagining Clinical Legal Education* (Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2018) p 6.

²³Ibid, p 7.

²⁴E Campbell ‘A dangerous method? Defending the rise of business law clinics in the UK’ (2015) 49 *The Law Teacher* 165.

(a) Introducing a MBA for graduate lawyers, with placements at law firm clients (2008–11)

Around the time of the financial crisis (2007–08), and in the years that followed, clients of law firms increasingly fed back to their legal service providers that they were seeking a broader range of commercial skill sets, including more industry knowledge and an understanding of their broader business and its commercial dynamics.

Given this context, it became clear that graduate solicitors entering the world of commercial professional practice would therefore need to have broader business understanding, and practical skills, to transition effectively into the workplace and respond to client needs. The existing legal education in many universities, and the graduate professional qualifications, built some core professional skills, but rarely had dedicated qualifications, modules (or lengthy periods of workplace experience) dedicated to building in-depth business understanding, outside of law clinics.

Spencer, then head of Learning & Development at City firm Simmons & Simmons LLP (Simmons & Simmons), therefore decided to implement a significant change to the educational pathway of the graduate lawyers entering the business in 2009–10. The change was to create a full-year MBA for the graduates to study after their LPC year, and before they entered the firm as trainee solicitors.²⁵ The MBA graduates all reported benefits from the commercially-focused modules, as well as the challenges of needing to engage with elements of study such as balance sheets and other financial aspects when they had not studied mathematics for many years. Internal stakeholders such as senior partners in the firm reported a clear shift in commercial understanding and the ‘level of commercial conversation’ which they had with the trainees who had studied the MBA.²⁶ There was a ‘control group’ of a number of trainees in the same years who had not been able to study the MBA, and so it was possible to compare the developmental progress of young lawyers in the firm through the initial years of the programme.²⁷

One significant observation was the disproportionately large benefit which seemed to arise not from the classroom elements of the MBA, but from the course’s four-week ‘Business Intelligence Project’. Instead of conducting this project as a piece of desktop research, the firm’s leadership agreed to send the MBA students out to the firm’s clients to work across client organisations. Given the focus of the project was to apply the commercial (MBA) learning, the students would work on the projects in clients’ commercial teams, and conducted projects focused around topics ranging from competitor or market analysis to the creation of new business metrics. This approach gave a positive message to clients about the skill sets which the firm was developing in its future lawyers. In addition, there was consistent, exponential developmental growth in the skills and confidence of these individuals.

Spencer’s initial hypothesis for sending the graduates out to clients was that it would benefit the client relationships of the firm, giving the message to clients noted above that the firm took seriously the clients’ feedback to develop commercially-astute legal advisory teams. It also showed the students that the firm trusted them at an institutional level to carry out projects with key clients at this very early career stage, and enabled them to build networks at client organisations. Above all, the MBA project structure created an opportunity for the graduates, under mentorship from senior leaders at the client and the law firm, to apply their learning to real projects, developing their broader, commercial skill sets ‘by doing’.

Feedback from many of the clients and the graduates on the placements demonstrated the benefit of placements in other ways. The firm’s trust in the students to send them to key clients and work on

²⁵N Spencer ‘Lessons for the future: implementing a new MBA programme in the legal sector’ (Legal Week, 19 March 2009); H Wilce ‘It’s the UK’s first MBA delivered entirely by a private organisation’ (The Independent, 1 October 2009), available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/student/postgraduate/mbas-guide/hilary-wilce-it-s-the-uk-s-first-mba-delivered-entirely-by-a-private-organisation-1795527.html>; N Spencer et al ‘The changed economy of legal knowledge: response through a radical change to the legal trainee career path’ HRM in the Knowledge Economy: British Academy of Management HRM Special Interest Group Workshop (2011), available at <https://intranet.royalholloway.ac.uk/management/documents/pdf/events/2011-bam-paper-legal-knowledge.pdf>.

²⁶See the stakeholders quoted in Spencer et al, above n 25, pp 7–9.

²⁷Ibid.

current, high-stakes work for these businesses drove a sense of ownership of one's learning, and responsibility for delivery of a real project which was going to be relied upon by the client's business. It became immediately clear to the students at the clients that the responsibility fell on them to develop effective skills and work strategies to manage stakeholders, to develop excellent project and time management habits (including for a high-stakes Board presentation of their work), and to learn the habits and practices of delivering to deadlines, dealing with potentially changing project briefs and goals, and other elements encountered regularly in a commercial workplace.

(b) Introducing an MA/LPC for graduate lawyers, again with placements at law firm clients (from 2012–13)

After seeing these benefits, Spencer evolved the MBA programme into a Business Masters programme (the MA/LPC) when he was Head of Learning & Development at Reed Smith LLP (Reed Smith), and one element which was maintained was the client placement/business intelligence project.²⁸ Following student feedback from the previous MBA projects about the key skills developed, the MA/LPC students were now provided with internally-run development sessions on 'consulting skills' before starting their client work.

The benefits of the MA/LPC workplace-focused period of learning are well stated in this quote from one of the students:

The client project was the best learning experience I can remember having taken part in, for several reasons. This was the first project I've undertaken that is genuinely important in the grand scheme of things. Whereas throughout the academic stages of my education work really only needed to be good enough to get the requisite grade, this project had to be excellent. I feel that this has prepared me for my training contract more than anything to date. Just as important, the project was a real-world task of genuine use to the client. Not only did this make the problem more engaging, it forced us focus entirely on the client's needs. In all prior educational projects, it was possible to take the discussion in different directions or focus on tangential issues. In this case, with respect to any research we were considering adding to the report, we were forced to constantly think 'is this relevant to the client's specific problem?' This taught us to be disciplined, and prioritise relevance to the end user over other considerations.

On the flipside, there were issues that the client had not raised at all in their assignment, which we found were very relevant. We had to be imaginative, and willing to depart from the assignment where it was necessary to deliver the most useful report. It was also useful in developing client relationship management skills. We kept in constant contact with the key stakeholders in the project, ensuring the scope and direction of the project was in line with their needs. We also had to manage differences and conflicts of opinion between individuals within the client. This taught us to ensure that everyone was heard (and perceiving themselves to have been heard) and their input valued, while not letting them unduly affect our recommendations.

(Reed Smith 2012–13 MA/LPC Student)

Spencer also developed the workplace connection further as part of the MA/LPC, exploring other ways in which it was possible to build the confidence of graduate students to enter the workplace, and how more connections could be made between the educational activity on the Master's degree and the office environment. A 'reverse mentoring' initiative involving the students on the MA/LPC course was created.²⁹ The students on the programme became 'teachers' of more senior colleagues already

²⁸L Manning 'Reed Smith launches combined MA and LPC' (The Lawyer 2B, 2 April 2012).

²⁹N Spencer and J Stokes 'Coaching and mentoring as a key leadership development tool across legal generations' in R Normand-Hochman (ed) *Mentoring and Coaching for Lawyers: Building Partnerships for Success* (London: Globe Law and Business, 2014) pp 111–113.

at the firm, and attended the law firm's workplace five times in the spring term of the course for discussion sessions (called 'Business coffees', lasting 45 minutes). At each meeting the MA/LPC students brought one of the business models learnt on the course and led a discussion where this academic business analysis model was explained to trainees and associates, and the students then applied the model to a client's business in one of the firm's five industry sectors. The hypothesis tested was that by linking the students' learning to the workplace and the 'clients' world', it would accelerate students' development. The more senior colleagues would also learn a business analysis model which they would not have formally been taught previously.

The findings from the exercise were that the students recognised the need to have mastery over one's new knowledge to, in effect, teach it to more senior members of one's future employer. In addition, the Masters' students expressed the confidence that the exercise had given them, simply from the habit of entering their future workplace regularly in the year before joining the firm, and being part of an exercise where they connected their academic learning directly with the (real) clients of the employer they would join.

One final, brief piece of research carried out with the graduate students on the MA/LPC programme was to explore the hypothesis of whether introducing more commercial learning modules into a young lawyer's graduate degree could help to change the way the students saw their professional 'identity'. As mentioned above, clients were increasingly requiring their advisers to develop broader skill sets, and there were also changes to a legal adviser's role throughout their career. It would therefore become increasingly important to help young lawyers develop more flexibility in how they saw their role and 'identity', beyond being simply a delivery mechanism for technical, legal advice.

The research question was, did introducing more commercial learning modules into a lawyer's graduate education help with this mindset shift in how the MA/LPC students saw their identity, and future professional role? To answer this question, the students were asked to select from a list of words and phrases about the nature of a City lawyer's role before they started the MA/LPC course, and then to select again from the same list of words/phrases after the first term of the course (when they had studied a number of business modules and concepts in addition to legal topics).

The results, as shown below, indicated that, at university, the law students viewed their future advisory role in a narrow technical sense but then, following the more business-focused graduate inputs, their perception shifted. The headline conclusion drawn from this was that it was possible to help students to make a link between the (more commercial, business) content of the graduate degree, and the identity which they would then have as a professional adviser in the workplace. (Tables 1 and 2)

3. Developing the concept of a full-year work placement law degree ('sandwich course') at undergraduate level (2014–present)

Following the experiments which Spencer carried out (reported above), seeing the benefits of embedding workplace experiences into graduate education, he then considered whether such a link would be beneficial even earlier in a student's developmental pathway, at undergraduate level. As noted above, the model of full-year work placements in undergraduate degrees has been long established ('sandwich courses', or 'years in industry'), but had not been tried as a model for Russell Group university law degrees.

In discussions with Perry and the School of Law at QMUL during 2014, it was agreed to create a pilot placement year programme as an option for LLB students, working initially with international law firm Reed Smith where Spencer was based (an initiative announced in January 2015).³⁰ Since this time, the placement year programme was then expanded to include other international law

³⁰T Moore 'Routes into law: Queen Mary teams up with Reed Smith on "degree with apprenticeship in law"' (Legal Business, 13 January 2015), available at <https://www.legalbusiness.co.uk/blogs/routes-into-law-queen-mary-teams-up-with-reed-smith-on-degree-with-apprenticeship-in-law/>; R Waller-Davies 'Exclusive: Reed Smith launches four-year degree with Queen Mary' (The Lawyer, 13 January 2015), available at <https://www.thelawyer.com/exclusive-reed-smith-launches-four-year-degree-with-queen-mary/>; M Kowalski 'Reed Smith partners with Queen Mary University to create law degree with

Table 1 Students' choice of words and phrases associated with being a lawyer at a City firm prior to the MA/LPC course

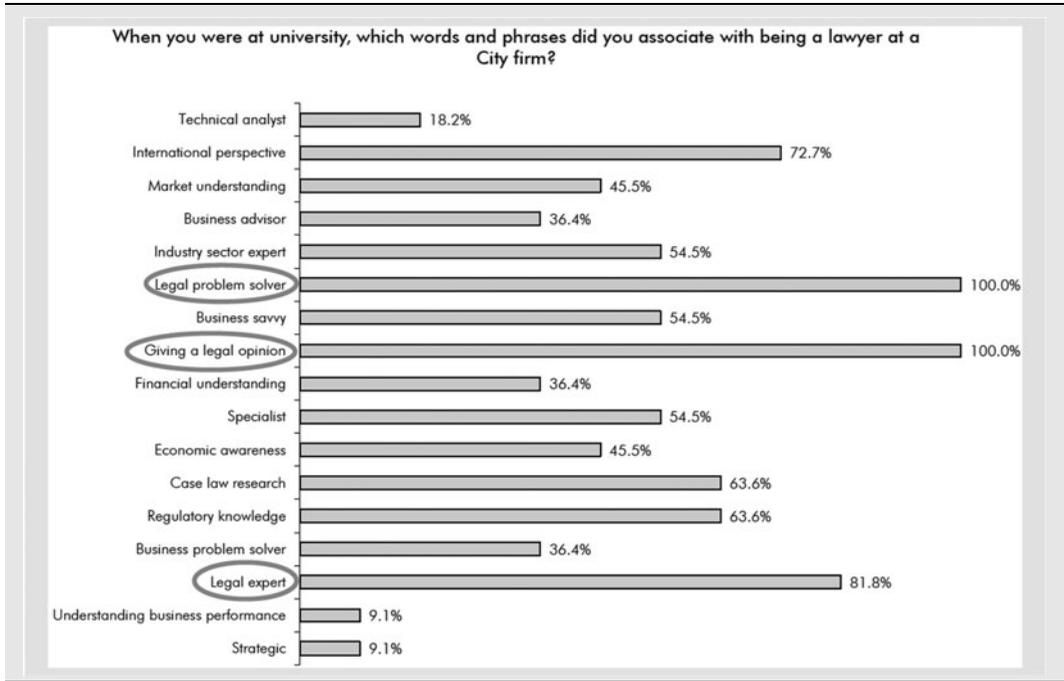
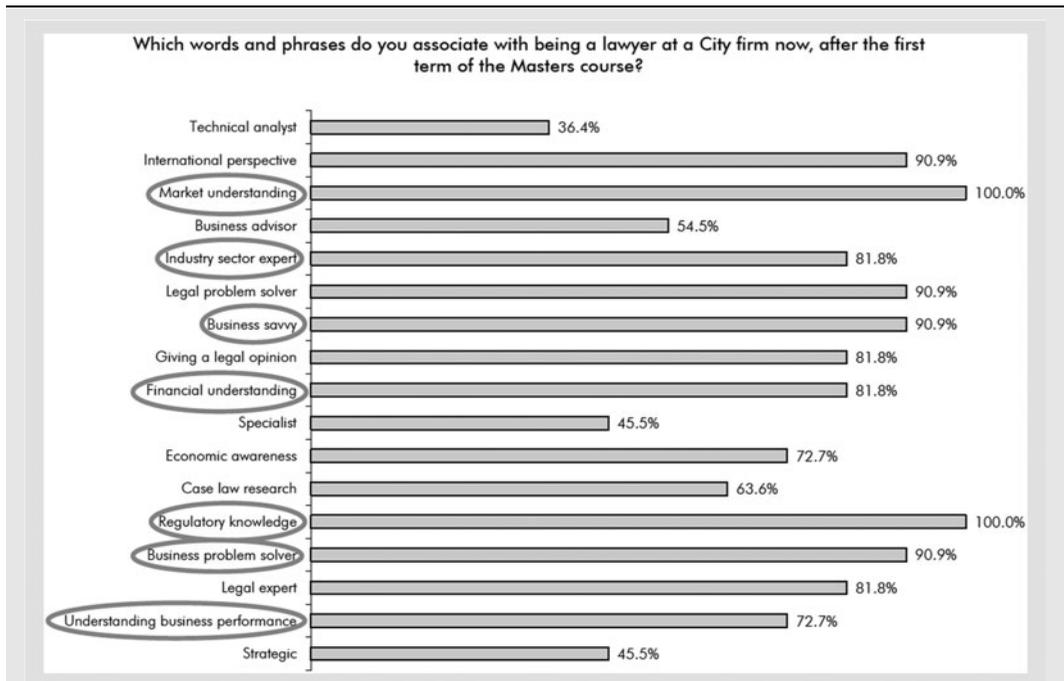


Table 2 Students' choice of words and phrases associated with being a lawyer at a City firm after one term of the MA/LPC course



firms: Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner LLP, Mishcon de Reya LLP, Paul Hastings LLP and Simmons & Simmons LLP, a leading family law practice (Bross Bennett LLP), the in-house legal team of a global fashion house (Chanel), and the legal team of an anti-poverty charity (Z2K). Placements therefore have taken place across varying types of legal practice contexts, but with the structure of the programme remaining the same at all employers:

- undergraduate students applied to QMUL to gain a place on one of the School of Law’s LLB programmes (the LLB, or a dual honours programme such as Law with Business or Law and Politics);
- during their programme the students then had the opportunity to apply to the legal services provider (initially Reed Smith, but now including the employers listed above), with the selection process being carried out entirely by the employer’s graduate recruitment or HR teams;
- students selected for the third year placement would complete their initial two years of study at QMUL (illustrated below) and then complete a year of paid work experience; and
- after the paid placement year, students would then return to QMUL, graduating from the ‘Law in Practice’ degree route.³¹

The revised structure of the QMUL undergraduate law degree for those who wished to have the placement option, was as follows (illustrating the initial programme specifically at Reed Smith): (Table 3)

Table 3 QMUL undergraduate law degree programme structure with placement year

Year 1: Modules	Year 2: Modules	Year 3: Modules	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Law • Elements of Contract Law • Land Law • EU/Law in Context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criminal Law • Tort Law • Equity & Trusts <p>(Plus module options)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jurisprudence and Legal Theory <p>(Plus Module Options)</p>	
Year 1: Modules	Year 2: Modules	Year 3: Placement	Year 4: Modules
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Law • Elements of Contract Law • Land Law • EU/Law in Context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criminal Law • Tort Law • Equity & Trusts <p>Business Skills Workshops</p>	<p>Year of work experience at Reed Smith LLP</p>	<p>Jurisprudence and Legal Theory</p> <p>(Plus module options)</p>

As Spencer’s experience to date had been of placing graduate students in client businesses, both authors were very focused on ensuring that undergraduate students, who had completed only two years of legal studies, would be prepared sufficiently to transition into the workplace, add value to Reed Smith, and receive academic and vocational benefit from the placement. From their first two

apprenticeship’ (Financial Post, 15 January 2015), available at <https://financialpost.com/legal-post/reed-smith-partners-with-queen-mary-university-to-create-law-degree-with-apprenticeship>.

³¹See <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/law/undergraduate/courses/ml30-law-in-practice/>.

years, the students had a core grounding in legal knowledge (as illustrated above), but the authors were keen to build further their workplace skills in preparation for the embedded workplace experience in Year 3. Therefore, building on the concept of the ‘consulting skills’ workshops run to prepare the MA/LPC students for their client placements (see above), Spencer created and delivered a series of two-hour ‘Business Skills Masterclasses’, focused upon: (Table 4)

Table 4 Business Skills masterclass sessions



- Managing myself;
- Managing my work;
- Managing my relationships;
- Managing my communication.

These sessions (still run annually to date), initially intended for those going on the placements, were found to be helpful to many law students, and so were subsequently made available to all QMUL law students as employability skills sessions.

From the employer’s (Reed Smith’s) perspective, strategic goals of the placement degree project included:

- the creation of young lawyers who would make even more effective workplace transitions, having experienced practically for a year what it is like to work in an international law firm, building workplace skills ‘by doing’;
- to give students practical experience which would allow them to make more informed career choices (after experiencing an international law firm environment during the third year of their degree); and
- to continue to build the firm’s brand for innovative training of future lawyers, thereby helping with its graduate ‘attraction’ work.

For QMUL, overall goals included:

- continuing to enhance the employability of its graduate lawyers by building workplace skills and links with employers during their degrees which would lead to them gaining excellent employment outcomes;

- creating an opportunity for paid work experience which would assist students financially during their time at university, thereby also helping to broaden access to higher education; and
- enhancing the Queen Mary brand as a university offering innovative law degrees to continue to differentiate the School of Law and attract the best law students to QMUL.

(a) Specific hypotheses and research questions to test

To measure the return on investment of the new degree, and to understand its impact, we were keen to test a number of hypotheses and research questions. We will review these questions through the lens of the initial six cohorts of students who took up the placement year (placements which took place from 2016–17 to 2021–22).

- 1 Does a ‘year in industry’ placement positively impact students in terms of skill development and, if so, how?
- 2 Were any benefits from the ‘year in industry’ placement impacted negatively by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the need to switch to (largely) remote working patterns?
- 3 Can the bringing forward of the first workplace experience of students to the undergraduate phase accelerate development and performance levels in the workplace?
- 4 Did the placement year improve a student’s substantive legal knowledge, as evidenced by their marks in the fourth year, and their degree classification?
- 5 Did the placement year enable students to achieve graduate-level employment outcomes?

To reach some preliminary conclusions on these questions, our methodology has been both qualitative and quantitative, as appropriate. We met annually with the students completing the fourth (final) year of their Law in Practice degree, asking them a series of structured questions to understand the evidence for questions 1–2, used employer data to answer question 3, and quantitative university data to answer questions 4–5 above.

(b) Does a ‘year in industry’ placement positively impact student skill development and, if so, how?

In terms of our first research question, the answer consistently from students in all research meetings with them since the programme started was that the placement did indeed positively impact their skill development, in different ways. In addition to specific skills which they could clearly identify they had developed (listed below, and in Appendix 1), there was an overall sense of increased self-awareness. The students consistently became much clearer about the skills which they knew they needed to develop to be effective in the workplace, as compared to their articulation of such skills before the placement (evidenced from interactions with the authors and in interviews). In addition, an enhanced, deep confidence was demonstrated which seems to have been the result of repetitive practice, reflection and feedback in the workplace over a period of 8–12 months.³² The students also consistently compared (favourably) in terms of skill development the placement year to the much shorter traditional workplace experiences at law firms (eg vacation schemes lasting 1–2 weeks), saying that the length and depth of the year-long experience had given a completely different opportunity to develop workplace skill levels.

From the annual interviews with students, carried out after their placement year, towards the end of their final (fourth) year of study at university, a number of skills areas (and good workplace ‘habits’) repeatedly were mentioned where students felt they had grown their capability considerably due to the placement experience.

Below we group the 13 areas mentioned most often by students under the four skills headings used for the Business Skills Masterclasses, indicating the balance of the types of skills developed. A selection of anonymised student quotes highlighting each area is gathered in Appendix 1. (Table 5)

³²At the different employers, the period of the Law in Practice placement ranged from eight to twelve months.

Table 5 Skills developed in the placement year, mapped against the skills headings used in the Business Skills masterclass sessions

Area of student skill development	Most repeated themes of capability growth mentioned by students in annual interviews after their placements
'Managing myself'	1. Greater self-knowledge, understanding one's strengths, and how one works best.
	2. Understanding the value of on-the-job 'stretch' development (ie the importance of learning from trying tasks for the first time), and being in a safe environment to learn through making mistakes, building confidence and resilience.
	3. Gaining new effective work habits from the placement which can enhance approaches to study in a student's fourth year at university (ranging from study effectiveness to an enhanced ability to practically apply knowledge).
'Managing my work'	1. Developing attention to detail, focus and accuracy in one's work.
	2. Improved organisational and time management skills, leading to greater efficiency and productivity.
	3. Improved drafting skills.
	4. Commerciality and understanding the 'cost' of one's time spent on tasks.
'Managing my relationships'	1. Understanding the need for flexing one's communication style to interact effectively with different colleagues.
	2. Realising the power of building mentoring relationships, having seen the value of cross-generational learning from interactions with experienced practitioners.
	3. Learning how better workload management and prioritising enhances team relationships.
'Managing my communication'	1. The importance of short and focused communication.
	2. The importance of tailoring communications to different client audiences.
	3. The importance of asking questions.

In addition to the specific areas of 'skill' and effective 'habitual behaviours' which were developed, the students also reported a number of related career benefits. For example, students reported the value of spending a year in a work environment to clarify one's career thinking, in particular the insight which the placement offered into private practice solicitor career paths in international law firms. One student commented that being in an environment where they saw more experienced solicitors gave them 'a "snap-shot" into your future if you choose that pathway', and emphasised that conversations with employees at the firm during the placement gave them valuable insights:

It made me think about the route to partnership. I understand now the level of commitment needed but it is something to strive towards. I shared an office with a senior associate, a mother, who achieved partnership while I was there; so that gave me a nice proof that it is possible in firms now to balance a family and achieving partnership.

Law in Practice placement student

(c) Were any benefits from the 'year in industry' placement impacted negatively by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the need to switch to (largely) remote working patterns?

(i) Background and context: the change in Covid-19 working patterns

Our second research question concerns the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the placement year experience. As was widely reported during the pandemic, law firms such as those where the students were based for their placement reacted swiftly to enable their lawyers to continue their client work, initially asking their staff to work entirely from home (in the early stages of the pandemic, from

2020–21). Later, in the first half of 2022 especially, law firms returned to a more ‘hybrid’ style of working, partly in the office and partly from home, with each firm specifying the number of days to be spent in the office. However, the challenges in the hybrid working period included that students were not necessarily co-located with their supervisors even on days when the student was in the office, as sometimes the supervisor may have been working from home on that day of the week, operating a different work pattern.

Our students on placement years during these three academic years, on placements from 2019–22, followed these working patterns as defined for all personnel. They spent time working either fully remotely from their other colleagues, or in patterns of 1–2 days in the office each week.

(ii) *The Covid-19 impact on benefits gained by students on placements*

The findings from our meetings with students who were on placements during these periods were, interestingly, that the learning, and many of the skills built, were the same as before the pandemic (listed above and in Appendix 1), but there was a slight change in emphasis given the changed pattern of working. In the table below, we cross-reference the main learning and skills groups built throughout the placement programme with the mentions of that skill built during the interviews of students on placements during the Covid-19 pandemic. (Table 6)

Whilst not wanting to over-interpret the findings from what is a small body of students (24 students were interviewed who had placements during this Covid-19 period, at five different firms), there are interesting aspects raised by their feedback which reflect widely-reported themes of pandemic-related workplace disruption and adaptation, both in the legal sector and beyond. We highlight three areas from the students’ feedback.

First, it is clear overall that, once employers quickly adapted to the extreme situation caused by the pandemic, needing to re-shape their daily working practices, much of the same placement benefits which students had gained before the pandemic were retained during this period of workplace disruption. Students reported skills growth in all four areas we defined, although comments made sometimes reflected a different *way* of building the skill because of the changed nature of the workplace, or because of team dislocation. It is noteworthy too that students reported additional benefits from the workplace adaptations, feeling that they honed in particular organisational skills which resulted in greater efficiency of working and higher productivity. This feedback mirrors a widely-discussed topic in the legal sector during the Covid-19 pandemic that productivity often was seen to rise as flexible and hybrid working patterns became the norm.³³

Second, a change reflected in the placements during the pandemic was in the area of ‘relational’ learning, with students citing fewer examples of skill-building in two relationship-related categories (the ‘Managing my relationships’ skills area in Table 6). Again, this finding connects with themes reported in the legal sector, and across all sectors of the economy at this time. Law firms expressed significant concerns during the pandemic about the lack of ‘learning by osmosis’ which comes from sharing offices with more experienced colleagues and observing the behaviours and skills of these experienced practitioners.³⁴ Our preliminary findings from the students who took part in placements during this period suggests that they encountered similar challenges.

Third, the need to proactively manage one’s workload to ensure a positive relationship with one’s supervisor was another skill defined as being particularly important by students on placements in the Covid-19 period. The ability to self-organise, communicate proactively, and prioritise effectively became critical in a period of being physically separated from their supervisor. Such skills enabled them to define precisely the work projects delegated to them, the output needed, and to be clear where to direct their attention first.

³³C Morgan ‘Flexible working: a win-win trend for employers and solicitors’ (The Law Society, 20 October 2021), available at <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/topics/hr-and-people-management/flexible-working-a-win-win-trend-for-employers-and-solicitors>.

³⁴A Hattersley ‘Training in turbulent times’ (Law Society Gazette, 26 October 2020), available at <https://www.lawgazette.co.uk/commentary-and-opinion/training-in-turbulent-times/5106106.article>.

Table 6 Skills developed in the placement year, mapped against the skills headings used in the Business Skills masterclass sessions, during the Covid-19 pandemic

Area of student skill development	Most repeated themes of student developmental growth in annual interviews with students after their placements	Skill referenced in student research meetings as being built during placements in the Covid-19 pandemic
'Managing myself'	1. Greater self-knowledge, understanding one's strengths, and how one works best.	1 mention.
	2. Understanding the value of on-the-job 'stretch' development (ie the importance of learning from trying tasks for the first time), and being in a safe environment to learn through making mistakes, building confidence and resilience.	2 mentions.
	3. Gaining new effective work habits from the placement which can enhance approaches to study in a student's fourth year at university (ranging from study effectiveness to an enhanced ability to practically apply knowledge).	1 mention.
'Managing my work'	1. Developing attention to detail, focus and accuracy in one's work.	1 mention.
	2. Improved organisational and time management skills, leading to greater efficiency and productivity.	3 mentions.
	3. Improved drafting skills.	1 mention.
	4. Commerciality and understanding the 'cost' of one's time spent on tasks.	1 mention.
'Managing my relationships'	1. Understanding the need for flexing one's communication style to interact effectively with different colleagues.	Not mentioned.
	2. Realising the power of building mentoring relationships, having seen the value of cross-generational learning from interactions with experienced practitioners.	Not mentioned.
	3. Learning how better workload management and prioritising enhances team relationships.	3 mentions.
'Managing my communication'	1. The importance of short and focused communication.	2 mentions.
	2. The importance of tailoring communications to different client audiences.	2 mentions.
	3. The importance of asking questions.	2 mentions.

(d) Can the bringing forward of the first workplace experience accelerate development and performance levels in the workplace?

Since the very beginning of the workplace learning experiments which Spencer had carried out in law firms from 2008, he had noted informally, year-on-year, how student development seemed to accelerate exponentially from being placed in a work environment. For example, comments were often made by senior leaders (partners in firms, or senior management at clients) working with the graduate students during the MBA and MA/LPC client placements that 'these students are performing at the same level as trainee solicitors, even very good trainee solicitors'. In other words, the performance of the (pre-trainee) students was the same as might be expected from lawyers with 1–2 years of further experience and development.

Spencer’s hypothesis for why this was happening included the points made in Section 2 above of this paper, especially the level of responsibility which they had when being put in project-leading roles in a workplace, creating a high-stakes environment where they saw the need to deliver. In other words, capable and motivated students were put in a developmental ‘stretch’ situation, and rose to the occasion, with appropriate previous knowledge-building of academic concepts and frameworks to apply from classroom modules, and skills module learning.

With the creation of the undergraduate placement degree, we were therefore interested to see whether or not there was any evidence that the performance level of (even more junior) students would be accelerated. In other words, how would workplace supervisors of third-year undergraduates see the performance level of the latter, when compared to other junior lawyers they supervised (ie trainee solicitors, who would have at least two more years of development)?

As a reminder of the typical developmental pathway of junior solicitors, the main educational stages for those following a typical university route in the UK are as follows (from left to right): (Table 7)

Table 7 Standard stages for students following a law degree route to become solicitors in England and Wales

Years 0–3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7 onwards
Undergraduate law degree (3 years)	Legal Practice Course/LPC Masters programme (6–12 months) ³⁵ (Paralegal experience could take place at this stage also)	Trainee solicitor year 1 (12 months, with a first ‘seat’ in months 1–6, and a second ‘seat’ in months 7–12) ³⁶	Trainee solicitor year 2 (12 months) with a third ‘seat’ in months 13–18, and a fourth ‘seat’ in months 19–24)	Newly Qualified solicitor

Once again (as with the performance of students on the MBA and MA/LPC projects), there was regular, informal feedback from firms ever since the placement year degree was created indicating that the undergraduate placement students were exceeding expected levels of work performance. This situation is evidenced by the fact that the firms not only continued, but even expanded the placement scheme recruitment, that members of graduate recruitment teams who moved firms subsequently introduced the placement year degree into their new firms, and also by the performance of the placement year students in assessments for graduate level jobs (training contracts), as described below.

At one firm, we also asked them to collect data on performance in a slightly more structured way, to give a more granular and diachronic analysis of the undergraduate student performance through the placement. At this firm, supervisors were asked at three-monthly intervals how they would assess the performance of these third-year undergraduate students. Would they equate it with the level of performance of a first-seat trainee, a second-seat trainee, a third-seat trainee, or a fourth-seat trainee? In other words, we were asking the supervisors to offer an assessment of the student’s performance against an increasingly high performance benchmark.

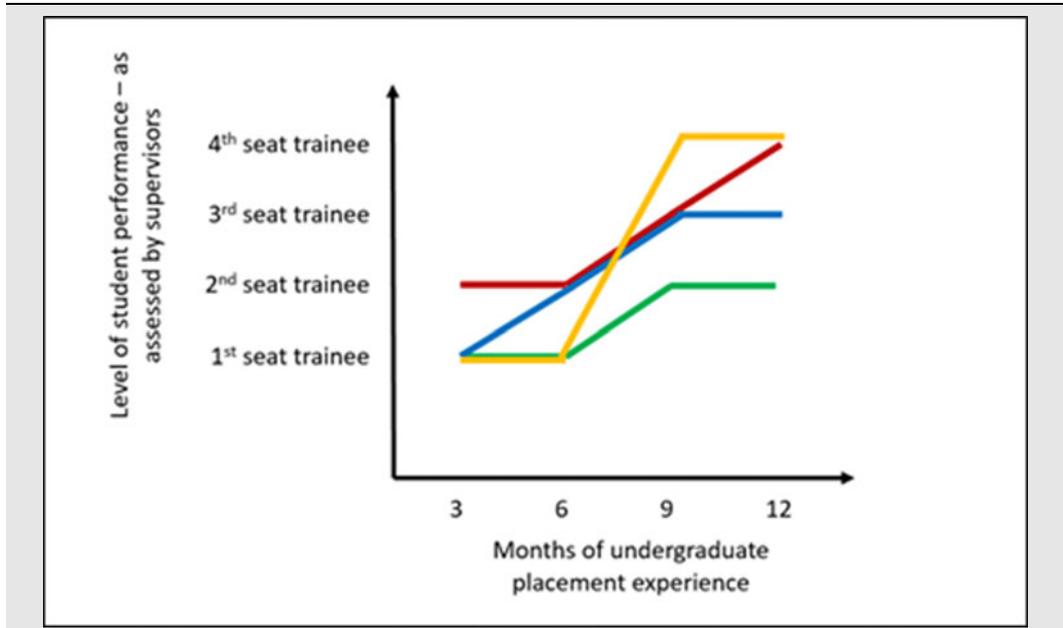
Again, we need to caveat that these pieces of data relate to a very small number of students (four in total, across two years of the placement scheme), but the analysis from supervisors again supports the

³⁵As noted earlier, gradually the LPC is currently being replaced with a ‘SQE Preparation Course’ for the new SQE1 and SQE2 examinations, with firms transitioning their future solicitors to these new programmes.

³⁶We note that the two-year ‘Trainee solicitor’ period is now being transitioned to the required two-year period of ‘Qualifying Work Experience’ (QWE) in many solicitors firms as part of the changes for the new SQE route to solicitor qualification in England and Wales.

informal feedback gained previously that the performance of the third-year undergraduates on the work placement is of a similar level to other employees with 2–3 years more educational development. What is also clear is the acceleration of performance, not in a uniform way, but three of the four students improved their performance level by at least two ‘steps’ across the placement as perceived by their supervisor. (Table 8)

Table 8 Supervisors’ perception of students’ performance at one law firm



(e) Did the placement year improve a student’s marks in the fourth year, and their degree classification?

We have noted above that students commented on the positive impact of the placement year in terms of their skills and approach to their studies in their final (fourth) year of study back at QMUL.

Quantitatively, for the 26 students at QMUL who have so far completed the placement year degree, their average marks achieved in their second year modules, and then the average marks achieved in their final (fourth) year modules after the placement, showed an average increase of 6.84%. It is interesting to note also that the average increase in placement student marks from their second year modules to the final (fourth) year module results during the two Covid-19 placement years (2019–20 and 2020–21) was particularly high, an average increase of 8.1%.

To give context to these increases in student study results of the QMUL placement students between their second year results and their final year results, for the large number (300+) students in each of the same academic years in QMUL’s School of Law, the average increase in marks from second year modules to final (third) year modules across comparable years was 3.6%, just over half the increase found in the results of the placement year students (see Appendix 2).

(f) Did the placement year enable students to achieve graduate-level employment outcomes?

Over the first five years of placement degree student cohorts, we also tracked the employment outcomes of the students who had chosen the placement year degree option.

In this time, the firms which offered placements were nearly all City firms, where the selection to be on a placement was then linked to the opportunity to undertake the firm's training contract assessment at the end of the placement.³⁷

Of the 26 students who undertook placements, 23 gained training contract places, and three did not, meaning that 88.4% of the placement students gained one of the legal sector's (coveted, and highly competitive) graduate level jobs as a trainee solicitor.

Whilst it is impossible to compare how such a (small) proportion of graduate level employment outcomes compares with the overall QMUL law student cohorts in the same year, it is nonetheless an indication that the placement degree graduate-level employment outcomes have been very positive.

Conclusions and potential next steps in developing workplace-focused legal education

From our work in the last 10–15 years, our conclusions are that there seem to be consistent benefits found from exposing law students to workplace experiences early in their developmental pathway. An immersive method of education with placements accelerates skill development in many different ways, and prepares students well for their transition from an educational environment to the 'world of work'.

Insights which stand out for us as learning, to inform future work, include:

- 1 The placement year positively impacted students in terms of skills development. Third-year undergraduate law students, with a solid basis of legal knowledge to apply in a placement (to Susskind's point, mentioned above³⁸), rapidly developed skills to a level previously defined as 'graduate level' in high-pressure workplace environments. This pattern has been seen and reported consistently across six years of the undergraduate placement year degree model.
- 2 Bringing forward the students' first in-depth workplace experience to their undergraduate phase accelerated their overall 'speed to capability' for workplace performance. One of the main factors which drove exponential student development in the workplace was giving them levels of responsibility (ie developmental 'stretch'). When given headroom and permission to take on more responsible roles (matter and team management, and client-facing leadership roles), the students grew into this level of responsibility and performed highly, as measured by themselves and the employers.
- 3 Students reported benefits in being prepared for the workplace with skills-focused courses before their workplace experience started.
- 4 Students reported that the depth and level of skill development was considerably enhanced by longer workplace experiences (eg the 8–12 month placement model compared to the much shorter 1–2 weeks of a law firm vacation scheme).
- 5 The research does not indicate that the benefits from the placement year were impacted negatively by the Covid-19 pandemic. Students gained very similar benefits from placements during the Covid-19 pandemic and, along with their employers, adapted well to the remote or hybrid working patterns forced upon the employers they were in.
- 6 The placement year was demonstrated to generally improve the students' substantive legal knowledge, as evidenced by their marks in the fourth year, and their degree classification. Specifically, students described a number of benefits from the habits and skills gained in the workplace which, they felt, helped them to achieve better academic results in their final year of study back in a university environment.
- 7 Finally, the placement year enabled students to achieve graduate-level employment outcomes. An extremely high proportion of the placement year students gained the extremely competitive graduate-level jobs (training contracts) following the placement year: 23 of 26 students.

³⁷Firms which offered placements on the first five years of the scheme, where placements took place between 2016–17 and 2020–21, were Reed Smith, Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner (BCLP), and Bindmans LLP. At Bindmans, the placement year did not automatically link into the firm's trainee solicitor recruitment process, whereas it did at the other two firms.

³⁸Susskind, above n 10.

The focus of this paper has been very narrow, looking specifically at workplace experience models of undergraduate placement degrees, and graduate ‘client projects’, and exploring whether or not these methods build student skills and create other related benefits. We are aware that a large number of other models of practical legal education have been carried out for many years, including through ‘lab’-type models, law clinics and legal advice centres.³⁹ Our goal here was simply to present preliminary findings on a very specific educational method we have tried, and to share learnings in terms of how we structured the experiments, to guide future work in this area.

In terms of proposals for future applications of this approach, we would make the following observations and suggestions. First, the effectiveness of such immersive education methods highlighted here underlines the value of universities considering related models such as degree apprenticeships, which are being supported to enable broader access to the profession.⁴⁰ Second, in addition to ‘year-long’ workplace options, and the options offered through law clinics, we suggest that there could be benefit in creating a more connected eco-system of employers and universities (including internationally), the ‘permeable membrane’ mentioned earlier between the fast-evolving world of legal practice (outside the university) and the educational world of the student. Our research indicates that students and employers value such connection points. Establishing such connections would enable students to build skills relevant to the world of work in real time alongside their studies, helping them to be ready for the opportunities offered by the market’s fast-changing (and increasingly plural) legal practice career pathways.

Appendix 1: Qualitative data from interviews with students who took part in placement years on the QMUL ‘Law in Practice’ degree programme from 2016–2017 to 2021–2022

The below data was collected by Perry and Spencer in research meetings with students who had placement years at law firms in each year. In these meetings, students were asked to describe:

- the skills which they built on the placement year;
- what they learnt about workplace culture;
- the impact which they felt the skills built on the placement had then had on their fourth year of study; and
- the insight which the placement year had given them into different career paths.

The quotes from the students, describing their experiences, learning and skills built, are grouped into the four overall areas used in the main body of the paper:

- A ‘Managing myself’;
- B ‘Managing my work’;
- C ‘Managing my relationships’;
- D ‘Managing my communication’.

A ‘Managing myself’

1. Greater self-knowledge, understanding one’s strengths, and how one works best

‘Every day I learnt something about myself too. How do I work best? How do I work in a team or by myself? That was incredibly helpful to work out now before I go into a full-time role in a year or two.’

2. Understanding the value of on-the-job ‘stretch’ development (ie the importance of learning from trying tasks for the first time), and being in a safe environment to learn through making mistakes, building confidence and resilience.

³⁹A number of innovative methods of clinical legal education are discussed by authors throughout the work of Denvir (above n 3) which have been applied in Law Schools around the world, ranging from ‘labs’ and legal clinic work to immersive simulations and project-based learning and are discussed in Section 1 above.

⁴⁰The adoption of apprenticeships (which can be offered as incorporating a law degree) has gained momentum since 2022, see L Cruz ‘Solicitor apprenticeships gather momentum as 40 firms poised to sign up’ (The Lawyer, 3 February 2023), available at <https://www.thelawyer.com/forty-firms-in-talks-to-improve-solicitor-apprenticeships/>.

‘The ‘stretch’ moments were really good development. Often I felt as though I was being thrown into really deep waters, but then I saw it wasn’t that bad after I tried things once or twice.’

‘It builds your confidence and resilience because you have worked through situations where you failed and didn’t do something 100% right – and that is really helpful.’

‘After working closely with the partner, they asked me to lead the client call, and it gave me so much confidence. So when, one month later, the opportunity arose again I thought: “Well, I’ve led one call, I can do it again”. That experience and the confidence it gives you are amazing.’

‘The risk is you try to be perfect, but I learnt you need to own up to problems when you make mistakes. So put yourself out there, in situations where you might not get it right first time, and the support will be there to solve any problem. That was one big learning for me, have the confidence to go for it’.

3. Gaining new effective work habits from the placement which can enhance approaches to study in a student’s fourth year at university (ranging from study effectiveness to an enhanced ability to practically apply knowledge)

‘You think about the cost of your time more and I have now adopted the method in my fourth year. I will start at 9.30am (like I did in the office) and use the same routine; so I’m stricter with myself and it keeps me on track’.

‘The habits from the placement built my level of focus and communication and I have used that in the 4th year – I don’t get distracted by social media as I did before. So I’m much more efficient now in how I work, and that is because of the workplace experience’.

‘The placement year completely changed the way I work now in the 4th year. I treat my university study as a work day, working through the day, stopping in the evening and at weekends to give myself a break. In my first two years I did the opposite! I was working in the evening and at weekends’.

‘The placement and the organisational side of it was really useful in my last year. For example, I noticed when I did the moot in my 4th year, my organisations skills and the quality of how I did the bundling and the notes seemed much better than others – because you’ve had a really high level of experience and demands from doing that work in the firm’.

‘One really important outcome has been that my skills in applying knowledge from theory to practice have really advanced, and I see the difference when I talk to students who didn’t do the placement. I was doing my 4th year module on tax and telling a fellow student about the excellent resources from some practical government factsheets – and I could see the value of these and apply it to the problem we were set; others seemed less able to do that. So that practical application of knowledge has really been enhanced through the programme.’

‘What I took away was to be confident in myself and bring all my unique skill sets into the office and not hide what I am. And I’ve taken that into the 4th year too, writing pieces in my dissertation or coursework about my own experiences in the Asia market. In a way, I rediscovered my “Asian self” and realised it’s OK to be “me” – don’t hide it.’

B ‘Managing my work’

1. Developing attention to detail, focus and accuracy in one’s work

‘It made me much better at having an eye for detail and taught me the power of being concise – the busy lawyers and clients really want to understand the essence of something, they are so busy’.

‘I learnt so much about accurate note-taking from the litigation work at a court hearing – we weren’t allowed to record the session and the skill of doing the notes accurately is really great to build’.

‘For me in the litigation team I was in, it really brought home to me the need for attention to detail. The witness statements were like a giant jigsaw puzzle where we needed to work out where the gaps were from many interviews, piece it all together, and see what this meant for the client’s case’.

2. Improved organisational and time management skills, leading to greater efficiency and productivity

‘The placement and office environment really makes you better at managing your time and being productive. In the 4th year I know that I structure my days better and am more efficient and productive’.

‘Getting comfortable with a never-ending ‘to do’ list was a real shift too. It’s different when you are student and there is a defined set of tasks and readings. I worked on about 30 matters in parallel on the placement and needed to juggle different matters happening at different speeds – and often there would not be specific deadlines, you needed to do that yourself. So I set up a “traffic light” system to try to deal with that’.

3. Improved drafting skills

‘Drafting was one skill I feel I have really improved. It’s really interesting, and creative, when I got the opportunity to draft something from scratch.’

4. Commerciality and understanding the ‘cost’ of one’s time spent on tasks

‘Another skill I developed was thinking commercially about the cost of our time. For one job we had a fixed fee quote for 5 hours of work and we needed to manage this carefully because in the end it was closer to 10 hours’.

C ‘Managing my relationships’

1. Understanding the need for flexing one’s communication style to interact effectively with different colleagues

‘You really learn how different people are and how they work, so their different methods, and how they like to be communicated with differently – so you see how flexibility is important to succeed and build relationships’.

‘Another point I took from the workplace was the value of seeing different points of view and seeing different approaches from colleagues: you learn that there is more than one way to do things, so you need to be open-minded’.

2. Realising the power of building mentoring relationships, having seen the value of cross-generational learning from interactions with experienced practitioners

‘Above all it really builds your confidence: you interact regularly with senior people and clients and otherwise you never really do that; it’s a very different experience to being on a 2-week vacation scheme, a different level of depth’.

‘The moments when someone more senior such as a partner took 5 minutes to teach us something, that is where a lot of the learning comes from and makes you feel so engaged’.

3. Learning how better workload management and prioritising enhances team relationships.

‘You have to get good at proactively managing your busyness and self-regulating. My supervisor would stand up for me and tell the team I was a placement student in terms of my hours, but you would also want to be seen to contribute fully – and in the last few months when I was leading my own deals and conversations with clients, you realise the need to be there, that the success sits with you.’

‘Learning to say “no” is key! You need to remember it doesn’t mean you’re not working as much as you should, and I learnt the hard way. Once a trainee gave me too much, I said “yes” to it, but it then meant I couldn’t support my supervisor. So you need to learn to be transparent about your capacity and explain why you’re busy. This is a key skill’.

‘In the practice I was in, time management and prioritising was something I really needed to master. I was juggling very tight deadlines and a constant stream of messages about many things. You need to ask yourself: “What is the priority here?”’.

D ‘Managing my communication’

1. The importance of short and focused communication

‘I learnt how important it was with supervisors to keep my inputs short and focused on the issue at hand, what was relevant was a question I always had to ask myself’.

‘You learn the importance of writing succinctly and keeping a very practical mindset. My supervisor hated it if a sentence was long enough that it needed a comma! The message was: “Keep it short, and to the point!”’

‘One skill I have definitely learnt is the ability to condense a lot of information and make sense of it – now in my fourth year I am much better at this than I was in year 2, before I went on the placement’.

2. The importance of tailoring communications to different client audiences

‘Doing pro bono work enabled me to really distil the advice I was providing. Many of the recipients of the advice were not native English speakers. I was able to work completely independently and develop a faster turnaround time.’

‘Another skill I realised was important, and I had a chance to practise, was putting across something very technical in layman’s terms – that was something I felt I improved on a lot. I needed to send a more technical version to the partner but then a second version for the client which a non-lawyer could understand’.

‘Another skill was to think how to communicate in blogs for clients to make things easy to understand – I thought if I write it so I can understand it, then that will work for clients too, as we needed to keep it clear and understandable for non-experts.’

'You realise clients don't care about what the law says. You need to understand that of course, but what clients care about is what their options are'.

3. The importance of asking questions.

'The level of responsibility was quite scary early on! And I realised that one important skill and habit, because of this responsibility, is the power of asking questions strategically. I learnt to form a list of a few questions I had which I needed to check, and asked them together. Above all the learning point was: ask more rather than less!'

Appendix 2: Change between average second year and final year module results for QMUL placement year students compared to the remaining QMUL law degree students

To date there are three academic years where there is data available to compare the change in average module results between the second year of study and the final year of study.

Again, we add the caveat that the number of placement students in each year is small, and the total number of law students is much larger.

YEAR 1

Student type	Average second year module results in 2018	Average final year module results	Average increase in results
Placement students (n = 5)	64.375	70.275	9.16%
All law degree students (n = 300+)	63.06	65.17	3.34%

YEAR 2

Student type	Average second year module results in 2019	Average final year module results	Average increase in results
Placement students (n = 8)	65.44	71.96	9.96%
All law degree students (n = 300+)	61.44	65.68	6.90%

YEAR 3

Student type	Average second year module results in 2020	Average final year module results	Average increase in results
Placement students (n = 5)	66.60	70.80	6.30%
All law degree students (n = 300+)	65.78	66.17	0.59%

Cite this article: Perry C, Spencer N (2024). The importance of 'acting yourself into new ways of thinking': preliminary findings on the impact of embedding workplace experiences in law degrees to positively impact student skills growth, degree results and employment outcomes before and during a global pandemic. *Legal Studies* 44, 99–121. <https://doi.org/10.1017/lst.2023.18>