

Law Student 2002: a profile of law students in Scotland

Final report 2005-06: the Diploma in Legal Practice

[Law Student 2002](#) followed a cohort of students at six law schools in Scotland through their studies. This final report profiles students undertaking the Diploma of Legal Practice, the professional qualification required to practise law in Scotland.

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The survey

This survey profiles students undertaking the Diploma of Legal Practice. It seeks to provide results on issues of student debt, part time work and career aspirations, and to identify any significant developments since completing the LLB and embarking on the practical element of their studies.

Some, but by no means all, of the same cohort of students who were profiled in the first two surveys will also have been profiled in this survey, depending on their LLB entry point, whether they completed an Ordinary or an Honours LLB degree, whether they have chosen to move straight from the LLB to the Diploma, and whether they have chosen to participate in the survey/s.

The survey was administered in the first or early in the second semester, and hence the information about anticipated debt at completion of the course can only be indicative. The results have not been tested for statistical significance. All percentages have been rounded to one decimal point.

The Diploma in Legal Practice

After completion of the LLB degree the [Law Society of Scotland](#) and the [Faculty of Advocates](#) require that all intending solicitors or advocates take the Diploma in Legal Practice (This is a requirement in so much as the Faculty require at least 26 weeks 'training' in a solicitors office before admittance to the Faculty. This training can only take place upon completion of the Diploma). The course lasts for 26 weeks and has been designed to be a bridge between the degree and practical training with a Scottish solicitor (this practical training is also a prerequisite for admission to the Faculty of Advocates). It aims to impart the practical knowledge and skills necessary for the working life of a solicitor. Although the course takes place at a university, much of the teaching is carried out by both practicing solicitors and advocates.

There are a number of fee funded places from the [Student Awards Agency Scotland](#) (SAAS) since the inception of the diploma, but there are no guarantees from year to year that funding will be available. There are more places available than there are grants awarded from SAAS. The grants are awarded on academic merit, which is

judged on the basis of marks obtained at first sitting in the professional subjects (usually taken in the first two years of undergraduate study).

In the 2005-06 academic year there were 605 Diploma places available in Scotland and 300 SAAS grants. The Diploma is available at five institutions in Scotland - Edinburgh University, Dundee University, Aberdeen University, the Glasgow Graduate School of Law and (since September 2005) the Robert Gordon University. Only the first four of these institutions agreed to participate in this survey.

The typical Diploma student

The survey results indicated that 69.4% of respondents were female and 30.6% male. It also indicated that her demographic has not changed from that identified by the first year LLB survey. Namely, she is female, single and aged between 21 – 25, one or both of her parents have attended university. Her father is most likely in a management or senior administration occupation and her mother, a teacher or other educational professional.

She has come onto the diploma in the academic year following completion of her LLB (85%).

She was in debt at the end of her LLB and expects to remain in debt following her Diploma even though she is working on a part time basis between 15 – 20 hours per week.

Survey respondents and universities

A total of 379 surveys were completed representing 63% of total diploma students. Of the four universities taking part in the survey two are 'Ancient' universities (labelled 'Ancient 1' and 'Ancient 2', one is a 1960s university and one is a combined 'Ancient' university and 1960s university (labeled 'Combined')).

Table 1: Number of respondents per university

	Number of respondents	% of total respondents
Ancient 1	51	13.5
Ancient 2	59	15.6
Combined	219	57.8
1960s	50	13.2

Financial circumstances

This section of the survey sought to identify the financial circumstances of students once on the diploma. It looked at parental support, financial institution borrowing, savings, anticipated borrowing to fund the diploma and expected debt at the end of the diploma.

Before discussing the survey findings, the following outlines the cost of, and funding available for, the diploma.

If awarded postgraduate student support, under the Postgraduate Student Allowance Scheme the SAAS paid tuition fees of up to £3,085 and an income assessed standard maintenance grant (up to a maximum of £3,420), plus other supplementary grants, if applicable (See www.student-support-saas.gov.uk/ for the award levels for 2005/2006). Fees vary from institution to institution but averaged around £3,900 in 2005/2006 (students are expected to meet any shortfall from their own resources). Students who do not obtain an SAAS award are responsible for their own fees and maintenance. Fifty per cent (185) of 369 respondents indicated they were in receipt of an SAAS award, (10 declined to answer). Graduates from Ancient 2 had the lowest percentage of recipients of an award (42%).

Of the 184 respondents who were not in receipt of an award, only 12 benefited from any other type of grant or bursary and only 16 from sponsorship. One hundred and three indicated parental support, and 24 benefited from family savings or investment plans. Family financial support is therefore important for those students not in receipt of an award.

Fees

In respect of these 184 self funding students 51% said they would be funding their tuition fees. Financing was divided between fees paid by parents 38.5%, partners (4%) or other (15%), (some indicated more than one source).

In respect of payments of fees by parents and regular financial support by family members, the same university, Ancient 2 had the highest percentage of the 'yes' response even though the overall student response was 'no'. (Ancient 2 is situated in Scotland's major commercial centre and, assuming most students attend the Diploma in or nearest their home city, it may be expected that parents here are more able to provide financial support). The 1960s university had the lowest amount of parental family support.

Table 2: Fees to be paid by parents

	Ancient 1	Ancient 2	Combined	1960s	Total
Yes	42.3%	57.7%	34.5%	33.3%	38.5%
No	53.8%	30.8%	61.2%	62.5%	56.3%

Total respondents: 182

Table 3: Benefit from regular financial support from family members

	Ancient 1	Ancient 2	Combined	1960s	Total
Yes	55.6%	75.9%	45.1%	34.4%	49%
No	44.4%	24.1%	54.9%	65.6%	51%

Total respondents: 210

Debt and amount following completion of LLB

Table 4: Students in debt after completion of LLB

	Ancient 1	Ancient 2	Combined	1960s	Total % (No.)
Yes	82.4%	74.6%	83.6%	78%	81.3 (308)
No	17.6%	25.5%	16.4%	22%	18.7 (71)

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the expectations of debt students expressed in the earlier surveys (only 15% of both the first and second year survey respondents anticipated graduating the LLB with no debt), the results of this survey indicate a high percentage of debt following completion of the LLB with 81.3% of respondents in total stating they were in debt; students at the 'Combined' university having the highest percentage of debt at 83.6%. The majority of those who reported borrowing borrowed from more than one source.

266 of 306 students reported that they owed money to the student loan company ('SLC') on completion of the LLB. 39% of those reported owing up to £5,000, 30% between £5,001 and £10,000, 20% between £10,001 and £15,000, 9% between £15,001 and £20,000, and 1.5% over £20,000. The other major sources of debt were the bank overdraft and the credit card. On the whole, debt to these sources was lower than debt to the SLC. On hundred and ninety nine of 306 students reported owing money on the overdraft, 87% owing up to £2,000. One hundred and twelve of 305 students reported credit card debt, 78% owing up to £2,000 (percentages rounded to one decimal point).

Interestingly the question of debt to parents polled the highest response of 'don't loan from this source' with 83% of students. Whether any financial contribution from parents is not considered a debt or students do not want to be in debt to their parents for various other reasons is a matter for speculation. Parents certainly do contribute to fee paying, as has been shown.

The trends indicated by the study of LLB students have continued through to the diploma students, with a high proportion of students acquiring commercial debt to continue their legal studies.

Anticipated Debt at the completion of the diploma

312 students indicated they would need to borrow to fund their diploma year (59 did not answer this question). 116 (36%) indicated they would need to borrow more than £3,000 (most likely those students not in receipt of the SAAS award). The Student Loan Company loan is generally not available for post degree courses, the major sources of borrowing therefore being a bank student loan or a bank overdraft (165) with 110 indicating a loan from another (unspecified) source (parents perhaps?)

Table 5: Anticipated borrowing to fund diploma year.

	Ancient 1	Ancient 2	Combined	1960s	Total
Less than £500	23.7%	36.5%	18.4%	20%	22.2%
£500-1001	10.5%	7.7%	7.9%	5%	7.8%

£1001-2000	10.5%	13.5%	7.9%	10%	9.4%
£1501-2000	7.9%	1.9%	6.3%	2.5%	5.3%
£2001-2500	2.6%	7.7%	7.9%	2.5%	6.6%
£2501-3000	7.9%	3.8%	10.5%	17.5%	10%
£3001+	34.2%	28.8%	38.4%	37.5%	36.3%
None/no debt	2.6%	0%	2.6%	5%	2.5%

Anticipated Total Debt:

This survey also asked students to anticipate their total (LLB + Diploma) debt on completion of the Diploma. 361 students responded to this question.

Table 6: Total debt on completion of the Diploma.

	No.	%
No debt	8	2.2
Under 1000	48	13.3
£1001-3000	40	11.1
£3001-5000	23	6.4
£5001-7000	34	9.4
£7001-10000	67	18.6
£10001-12000	16	4.4
£12001-15000	35	9.7
£15001-17000	15	4.2
£17001-20000	39	10.1
£20001-25000	36	10

Eight respondents (2.2%) anticipated having no debt at all on completion of the diploma, (compared with 71 (18.7%) on completion of the LLB). One hundred and fifty seven (38%) now anticipate owing more than £10,000 in total on completion of the Diploma (including 4 who estimate debt at over £30,000). It is perhaps surprising that anticipated debt levels are not higher given the level of debt on completion of the LLB and the level of anticipated borrowing during the Diploma year, but this may perhaps be accounted for by some repayment of the LLB debt during the summer preceding the Diploma (see below).

In anticipating this total debt however, only 50% had taken into account the Graduate Endowment contribution, and therefore total debt may well be higher for many than anticipated.

The Graduate Endowment is a fixed sum that some graduates will be liable to pay after they have completed their degree. Scottish domiciled students, or EU students, who entered a full-time degree course at a publicly funded Scottish institution for the

first time in 2001-2002, or later will be liable if they are awarded a degree or satisfy the requirements for an award. However, not all graduates will have to pay. Some will be exempt because of their personal circumstances during their course while others will be exempt because of the level or length of their course. (The amount you pay is set at the beginning of your course. The fixed amounts are set when you start your course as follows. £2,000 if you began in session 2001-2002, £2,030 if you began in session 2002-2003, £2,092 if you began in session 2003-2004).

Student Savings and anticipated borrowing

Before commencing the diploma respondents were asked whether they had saved money towards the cost of the diploma year, with 35.4% responding yes and 64.6% no. This is surprising when taking into account how much they anticipated they needed to borrow to fund their diploma year.

Student employment during studies

Summer vacation

The trends indicated in this section of the survey can go some way to help analyse the results indicated above. Most of the respondents worked both in the summer vacation (327) and part time (250) during their studies. However, the overall response was that the work undertaken did not cover the students' living expenses.

Of students who worked during the summer vacation, they worked on average between 15-20 weeks. Traditionally the summer vacation is the time that students take the opportunity to obtain work experience in the legal profession which is seen as crucial by the profession in obtaining a traineeship. However the study has indicated that only 37.9% of working respondents worked in this area during their vacation. As this type of work is also traditionally unpaid or poorly paid it can be assumed that the need to cover personal expenses was a concern; students with financial support from other sources are therefore in a better position to obtain crucial work experience.

Part time work

Over two thirds of the respondents worked part time during their diploma year. They worked on average 16-20 hours per week.

Table 7: Working part time during diploma year

	Ancient 1	Ancient 2	Combined	1960s	Total
Yes	77.6%	52.6%	72.1%	54%	67.4% (250)
No	22.4%	47.4%	27.9%	46%	32.6% (121)

Number of respondents: 371

Respondents were specifically asked to indicate if this work was during the week, weekend or both and 55.8% of the respondents indicated they worked both at the weekend and during the week. The type of employment was predominantly shop work with 32.8% of the respondents indicating this type of work and 29.3% indicating

work in either a law firm or law related i.e. local authority, researcher or CAB. 76.2% of respondents indicated that they needed to earn up to £500 per month to cover living expenses and 54.9% indicated that the hours they worked did not cover their living expenses.

Table 8: Hours worked during term time.

	Ancient 1	Ancient 2	Combined	1960s	Total
0-5 hours	5.3%	17.2%	8.3%	11.1%	9.2%
6-10 hours	7.9%	31%	21%	18.5%	19.9%
11-15 hours	21.1%	27.6%	18.5%	11.1%	19.1%
16-20 hours	34.2%	20.7%	35%	37%	33.5%
21-25 hours	10.5%	3.4%	12.1%	11.1%	10.8%
26-30 hours	21.1%	0%	1.9%	7.4%	5.2%
36-40 hours	0%	0%	1.9%	0%	1.2%
40+	0%	0%	1.3%	3.7%	1.2%

Approximately 50% of students indicated they worked 16 or more hours per week, suggesting that the concept of ‘full-time’ and ‘part-time’ students is increasingly outdated. Of those students who worked, 50% believed this work was having a detrimental effect on their studies.

Traineeship Preferences

This element of the study looked specifically at respondents’ preferences for their traineeship which immediately follows their diploma year. All intending solicitors must serve a two year post-diploma training contract with a practising solicitor in Scotland and after completing the first year of training, a trainee can, subject to satisfactory progress and with the agreement of the training firm, apply to be admitted as a solicitor in order to gain valuable experience of appearing in court. Therefore any trends outlined will give some indication as to the areas of the profession where there may be a shortage of newly qualified practitioners.

Students were asked firstly whether they would consider a traineeship in various types of legal practice. The type of practice receiving the highest positive response was the high street practice (69.9%), followed closely by a commercial firm (67.6%), other public sector (51.6%), the public prosecution service (51.3%), a legal aid firm (46.5) and finally a rural practice (41%). Interestingly the results to this same question in the 2002/03 survey of first year students revealed traineeships in high street or large commercial firms were very popular (73% and 80% of students respectively indicating that they would consider a traineeship in such firms). The Public Prosecution Service (PPS) was also popular (69%), as was Legal Aid (61%). Least attractive to students was the prospect of a traineeship in a rural practice (36%).

However, when asked to indicate their first preference, this study indicated that the commercial firm was the most popular choice (especially so in the case of respondents situated in Scotland's main commercial centre) and secondly the high street firm. Worryingly legal aid practice was the fifth of six preferences, indicating that should the trend indicated materialise and continue there will be a shortage of Legal Aid practitioners in Scotland. The public prosecution service attracted a positive first preference response of only 9.6%, while rural practices were very unpopular as a first preference choice. While legal aid has never been a particularly popular choice, these results would suggest that over the course of their studies, interest in public prosecution and legal aid firms in particular, wane. Reasons for this can only be speculated upon.

Table 9: First Preferences

	Ancient 1	Ancient 2	Combined	1960s	Total
Legal Aid firm	6.3%	3.8%	7%	2%	5.8%
Rural practice	10.4%	3.8%	1.4%	6.1%	3.6%
High Street Firm	35.4%	18.9%	28%	53.1%	31%
Large Commercial Firm	35.4%	54.7%	39.7%	28.6%	39.8%
Public Prosecution Service	6.3%	13.2%	10.7%	4.1%	9.6%
Other Public sector	6.3%	5.7%	13.1%	6.1%	10.2%

Total respondents: 364

Respondents were specifically asked to indicate what criteria they used for making their preferences and perhaps surprisingly career prospects and income were not primary contributory factors.

Table 10: Contributory Factors to Preference

	Ancient 1	Ancient 2	Combined	1960s	Total
Income	26.1%	40.7%	35.7%	39.6%	35.7
Type of work	67.4%	74.1%	66.7%	70.8%	68.4
Lifestyle	26.1%	33.3%	28.6%	39.6%	30.5
Career Prospects	41.3%	42.6%	39.4%	35.4%	39.6
Family Reason	4.3%	1.9%	8.5%	18.8%	8.3%

Total respondents: 361

The main contributing factor to the choice of traineeship preference was the type of work.

62.5% of the respondents indicated that they had secured a traineeship, 75.5% of these respondents were studying their diploma at Ancient 2 University. This high number of traineeships already secured could be attributable to Commercial

traineeships. Large Commercial firms recruit trainees during their LLB studies usually 18 months prior to the traineeship start date and in Scotland most large commercial firms are situated in the major commercial centre, the site of Ancient 2.

As would be expected of a professional qualification, most respondents intend to go straight into a traineeship after the Diploma. Of the 52 of the respondents who indicated that they did not intend to take up a traineeship, 9 intend going on to post graduate study, 15 to find a job, 21 to travel and 7 intended not to become a trainee but did not know what they intended to do.

It should be noted at this point that the Law Society of Scotland recommends a trainee salary of £14,000 for the first year and £17,000 for the second. This is less than the salary paid to [medical graduates](#) during their one year pre-registration period which could typically be £30,433.

Future Career Plans

Of the 354 students who responded to this question, 87% indicated they planned a future career as a Solicitor and 5.1% as an Advocate. The remaining were either not sure, planned to be a paralegal (or made a multiple selection).

Respondents were also asked to indicate in what sort of legal work they would most like to specialise in the longer term.

Table 11: Choice of specialisation

	Ancient 1	Ancient 2	Combined	1960s	Total
Commercial	20.4%	31.7%	30.3%	29.7%	28.9%
Criminal	14.3%	22%	19.7%	21.6%	19.4%
Family	14.3%	14.6%	15.4%	16.2%	15.2%
Property and Conveyancing	14.3%	4.9%	10.1%	18.9%	11.1%
Human Rights	8.2%	2.4%	4.3%	0%	4.1%
Welfare	0%	0%	2.1%	2.7%	1.6%
Housing	4.1%	0%	.5%	2.7%	1.3%
Welfare	2%	2.4%	1.1%	8.1%	2.2%
Don't know	14.3%	12.2%	14.4%	0%	12.4%
Immigration	0%	0%	.5%	0%	.3%
Multiple Selection	8.2%	9.8%	1.6%	0%	3.5%

Total respondents: 315

Commercial law still remains the main choice of specialisation mirroring the findings on traineeship preferences. However, Criminal law appears as a second choice of specialisation in the diploma student's longer term career plans. Criminal legal aid applies in all courts and is available in both solemn and summary cases in Scotland. This finding contrasts with our conclusion above that traineeship preferences suggest a resulting shortage of Legal Aid practitioners. One possible explanation is that those respondents stating a preference for training in commercial and high

street firms after taking their diploma had not written off the possibility of Legal Aid work in the future. Only around 10% of respondents indicated an interest in human rights or welfare related law.

Again, as indicated in the traineeship preferences, the criteria for choosing a specialisation was type of work as opposed to career prospects or income.

Table 12: Criteria for specialisation choice

	Ancient 1	Ancient 2	Combined	1960s	Total
Income	21.4%	30.4%	33.2%	26.3%	30.3%
Type of work	57.1%	80.4%	71.7%	76.3%	71.6%
Lifestyle	19%	34.8%	24.5%	18.4%	24.5%
Career Prospects	14.3%	30.4%	26.6%	26.3%	25.5%
Family Reason	14.3%	2.2%	7.6%	2.6%	7.1%

Total respondents: 310

Of those respondents who did not plan a legal career 35.2% indicated a career in the business sector.

Conclusion

At the commencement of the Law Student 2000 project a number of questions were asked. Would students work the perceived 11-20 hours per week, will they have borrowed to finance their studies and living expenses, are their estimates of debt realistic, and what are their ambitions?

This study of diploma students, students in the final year of university before embarking on their legal career path, has answered these questions and highlighted other important issues.

At the end of their academic stage of training for the legal profession 81.3% of students were carrying debts as they embarked on their final practical stage of training. At the end of this stage, as they commence their training contract, over half of the graduates (57%) of students anticipate they will be carrying over £7,000 of debt despite the prospect of earning only approximately £14,000 in their first year of traineeship. They had worked on average 16-20 hours per week throughout their diploma studies, having worked a similar amount of hours during their LLB studies. This means that during the five years of demanding study students were working to fund either their course or living expenses or both yet will still carry significant debt as they embark on their chosen career.

In terms of career choice, interest in legal aid and public prosecution service work appears to have waned, and work in a large commercial firm is the most sought after position for both traineeships and future careers.

