



Is it possible to pursue a career in law in the UK after graduating from Harvard College?

Over the years, a number of prospective applicants interested in a career in law have asked us this question. There are several routes to a law career; whether through the UK undergraduate system, or by obtaining a degree in a broader field and then specialising. We asked a recent Harvard graduate from Manchester to give us his personal perspective on returning to the UK to practice law.

Daniel Goodkin, Graduating Class of 2006, answers...

In short, the answer is “yes”. Although undergraduates cannot study law at Harvard, they are well placed to return to the UK and pursue a career in law. The best route is to ‘convert’ with a one year CPE/Graduate Diploma in Law. It has long been true that both barristers’ chambers and solicitors’ firms award a high proportion of pupillages and training contracts to such non-law graduates. Indeed, practitioners place a higher value on a candidate’s maturity, commercial awareness and general academic ability than on the volume of law she knows when applying. Consequently, those with expertise and proven ability in a range of subjects, and experience of other countries central to the globalised legal market, will fare well.

Moreover, if you wish to secure a top pupillage or training contract it is essential to stand out—both on paper and in interview. Obtaining your degree and academic references from the top ranked university in the world will help to pass the paper round. Spending four years discussing and debating a great range of academic topics with able students and renowned scholars should get you the rest of the way. I thoroughly enjoyed and benefited from exposure to a wide range of subjects during my undergraduate years at Harvard.

You might learn more law in three years than one, but, in my opinion, you are not likely to remember much of what you learn, nor will most of what you learn be relevant to your chosen area of specialisation. The CPE is largely populated with intending practitioners, so although it lasts only a year, that year is highly focussed on the professional sphere.

It should also be borne in mind that both law and non-law graduates must complete the Bar Vocational Course to become barristers, or the Legal Practice Course to become solicitors, during which any holes in your knowledge should be revealed and filled. Some CPE graduates also elect to do a Masters in law.

Many consider law a relatively dry subject when studied academically: the fun being in its application. When memorising statutory provisions and case names it is hard to disagree with this view. Anecdotal evidence suggests many seasoned practitioners would, in retrospect, have preferred to study another subject before beginning their careers in law. If you have an interest in other subjects, or, unsurprisingly, cannot say with absolute certainty you wish never again to study anything but the law, then the ‘liberal arts degree’ would be well suited to you.

Harvard’s superb debating and mock trial teams improved my oral advocacy and communication skills, and are recommended. Your written skills could also be honed by writing for one or more of Harvard’s many student publications.