

LEGAL EDUCATION REVIEW

Law Graduates' Skills – An Employers' Perspective

Elisabeth Peden and Joellen Riley

Legal education – along with all tertiary education – has become oppressively expensive in recent years. Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) fees have increased significantly, many faculties are charging top-up fees, and some students desperate for a legal education are taking up a rising number of full-fee paying places. Most students graduating from law faculties at the present time – even those on HECS – expect to be burdened with a debt of around \$40,000 when they graduate. The scramble for jobs at the end of their study to pay off this burden has become more stressful, and has induced strategic job-centred approaches to the selection of units of study. Many students seek advice on what units of study will best enhance their employability.

This paper outlines a project undertaken to collect empirical data from employers of graduates of the University of Sydney Law Faculty. The project, funded by a grant from the Faculty's own Teaching Innovation Fund, was designed as a pilot project, to sample the views of a range of employers. An electronic survey was designed, and distributed to 100 organisations known to have employed University of Sydney law graduates recently. The survey went to small and large private law firms, government and non-government (non-profit) organizations, and commercial enterprises. Unfortunately, we did not obtain responses from all of the organizations invited to participate. Some were cautious of responding to the survey because they claimed they did not employ our graduates in sufficient numbers to be able to generalize their responses. Some did not reply at all, and because of the limited funds available for the project, no attempt was made to follow up those people. The reasons why some people did not respond at all might be the subject of a further study.

If this small sample is at all indicative of broader opinion, it may be that law schools' energies in expanding units of study on clinical legal skills are misdirected. The respondents to this survey suggest that they want to recruit graduate lawyers who can research, analyse and understand legal resources – meaning cases and legislation. They want recruits who can apply that knowledge to communicate advice and opinions on the law. The practical competencies – in drafting, interviewing, advocacy – come afterwards, with experience and on-the-job training.