



## **CLIENT INTERVIEWING: BECOMING A NATIONAL CHAMPION**

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Ryan and Tom lifting the 2017 National Trophy

### **Introduction**

At the beginning of my final year on the LLB programme, I did not foresee the level of success that my partner Thomas Faulkner and I would enjoy in the National client interviewing competition. In my opinion, it was a truly remarkable jump from competing in the University internal competition amongst fellow peers to becoming International Competitors representing England and Wales last April. By way of background, all of the interviewing competitions follow a very similar format; a team of two law students interview a client, played by another student or an actor. The organisers of the competition prepare scenarios and provide briefs to both the 'client' and the student solicitors. The aim is to simulate an initial client interview from legal practice. The role of the student solicitor is to build an effective relationship with the client, obtain as much information about the issue they have come to discuss and then advise the client on his/her position and offer possible legal and practical solutions. The student solicitors are also required to audibly reflect on their performance at the end of the interview. This sort of reflective approach is an essential part of legal professional practice and it was a part that we found we really enjoyed.

While this process sounds fairly simple on the face of it, there were a number of issues that arose throughout our journey to the International competition. We often faced clients who were briefed to be deliberately difficult as well as areas of law that were completely new to us.

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Fortunately as a result of what we learnt throughout the competition together with some expert advice, we were able to put strategies in place to combat and deal with these situations and not let it affect our performance. We also found we enjoyed these challenging situations the most; they tested our skills to the maximum, helped improve our approach and technique and were definitely a key factor in us reaching the advanced stages of the competition.

### **First Attempts**

Our client interviewing experience actually began in December 2015, a year earlier, when we were runners up in the internal Law School competition and so did not progress to the regional stage of the National Competition as this is the winners' privilege. Our enthusiasm was not dampened and we returned for the next internal competition in December 2016. On this occasion we were successful winning the internal competition and progressing to the Regional Competition representing Plymouth University. On reflection, the previous year's knockback had made us even hungrier to succeed and it was definitely an occasion where being unsuccessful enhanced our performance for the future, as we did not want to come so close and end up not being able to progress for the second year running. All National Competition competitors were invited to attend a training day at Oxford Brookes University at the end of January 2017 to gain some tips and expert guidance before competing in the Regional Competitions. This was one of the most insightful and useful days in the whole process. In the afternoon session, we all had to practise an interview in front of other students and expert lecturers. We received some exceptional feedback, with the lecturers highlighting many positive elements in our performance as well as providing useful development advice which significantly enhanced our performance at the Regionals. We also learnt much from observing other student interviews, which provided useful ideas and techniques.

### **The Regional Competition**

The Regional stage of the National Competition was held at Plymouth University in February 2017. We competed against two other Universities, Cardiff and Gloucester. We were both aware that this would be at a much more advanced level than the internal competition. Frustratingly, we felt our first interview did not go particularly well. We finished our interview after about 13 minutes (we had a time allocation of 25 for the interview), and this made us worry that we had not covered all the details needed. It was also a tricky area of law in relation to Property Law and neither of us had much knowledge on the exact provisions and requirements. I speak for both of us when I say we came out of the interview absolutely devastated, thinking we had blown our chances of progress. We felt that the other teams would perform at a much higher level and score better marks. However, the Regional stage

comprises 2 interviews and therefore provides 2 opportunities for each competing team to demonstrate their skills to the judges. So, we quickly put aside our disappointment from interview one to concentrate on the second interview, knowing we would have to perform at our very best to be in with a chance of progressing to the National Final.

It definitely wasn't our best interview, but it wasn't too far away either. We covered all the essential information and offered some sound advice to the client, who left looking fairly happy. In our reflection at the end of the interview, we said we were both happy with how the interview had gone and felt we had done as well as we could. But we were not at all sure whether we would progress further in the competition, and if truth be told, in the moments prior to the news being announced we did not expect Plymouth University to be read out as the South West Regional Winners. It was definitely a shock, albeit a welcome one! Following the announcement, there was a short drinks reception where we were able to speak more 'informally' to the judges and it was interesting to hear their range of views and opinions. From the feedback we received, I believe the social workers who sat on both panels liked our approach more than the legal practitioners. In hindsight, this was no surprise as we both worked more on ensuring the client was comfortable and in control, more than concentrating on the legal advice we offered.

### **Going (Inter)National**

We then encountered the National Competition, which we knew was going to be no easy task. This was the final process of the Client Interviewing Competition for England and Wales, and ultimately the ten best teams in those countries were set to compete head to head. We were tasked with three different interviews during the day, all concentrating on a different problem. We were able to do our research prior to the weekend and tried to identify potential areas that might come up - there was always going to be a surprise somewhere! We came out of each interview, knowing that we had done our best, and that was all we could have asked for. Looking back at the day now, we thought we had delivered two average interviews and one near-perfect interview, which was reflected in our breakdown of marks. The day as a whole was a remarkable experience. We were judged by some very experienced professionals and to receive such excellent and forward-thinking feedback left us feeling confident, motivated and excited for the International Competition. This was being held a month later at the University of Kent, Canterbury. A shame that the only year we were eligible to compete the International Competition, it was being held on our own doorstep!

After a night of celebrations, we then got back to business the following week. We had meetings with Pippa Trimble (Team Coach/Lecturer) to devise a strategy to tackle the

International Final scenarios, and she kindly arranged a meeting with Ashfords partners David Ellis and James Hemsley to give us advice, tips and guidance for the Finals. Once we departed on the 19 April for a five day trip to Kent, we were fully prepared and ready for the challenge ahead. The International Competition was without doubt the highlight of the whole experience - I'm a football supporter, and it reminded me of an International tournament setting, where there was a great atmosphere around the campus and the interviews came thick and fast. Surprisingly, we only had two 'group-stage' interviews to cement our place at the semi-final stage. Both went extremely well and we ended up finishing second in the overall rankings, just marginally behind the leading country of Sri Lanka/India (the countries were partnered together). We both envisaged that this would leave us with a realistic chance of making it to the final, knowing how well we had done to this point. Perhaps, that was one of the reasons we did not get past the semi-final stage. The more we both contemplated the reasons why we exited at that particular stage, the more obvious it became that we were failing to appreciate how well we had done to get to that stage of the competition. Getting as far as the semi-final was perhaps the killer blow for us. Every year a team from England and Wales gets to compete at the International Competition but we were the first team to represent Plymouth University at this level since 1993. We worked extremely hard, supplemented each other's personality allowing a wonderful team-spirit to develop, and kept trying to improve. We both knew that however well we had done in one particular interview there was always something that could be improved for the next occasion.



International competitors 2017

Without this competition, I would not have been able to share such wonderful memories throughout my final year of University. I will hold no punches, when I say it was definitely time-consuming and a high level of commitment is needed to go far in the competition, but the benefits definitely outweigh the amount of preparation time. I would really like to see a team from Plymouth University excel in this competition again in the near future. Finally, I would like

to say a huge thanks to all those that helped us along the way, including Graham Robson , Julie Thompson and Pippa Trimble who not only provided us with wonderful advice and development points but they also gave us the opportunity to show ourselves on an International platform. I will be forever thankful for the help we received from all the professionals along the way.

My biggest thanks have to go to my partner Tom, pictured here with Woody Mosten the Founder of the competition. We definitely exceeded our own expectations when we entered the internal competition during our second year of studies. We both had a wonderful insight into how each other worked and what made us click as a team, and at times we definitely bailed each other out once or twice! The memories that were made through this competition will be very personal to both of us and it was an absolute pleasure working alongside someone so committed, reliable and brilliant at what he did. Tom, it was an absolute pleasure and I sincerely hope we get to work together again at some point in the future.



I hope if you are competing in the internal competition this year and reading this article, this will give you the required motivation to work hard at it, listen to the advice given, and enjoy it! I wish this year's University of Plymouth team the best of luck, and I hope you go one better than we did!