



STUDYING LAW (AND GROWING UP) DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

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Introduction

My decision to study law came from a background which focused on a media portrayal of the legal profession. From watching *Criminal Minds* to endless episodes of *48 Hours* at a young age, I found that I related to the formalities and exciting depiction of the justice system. Despite this, my higher education aspirations did not fall immediately on law but rather on drama. However, I deviated from this idea after discovering the fiercely competitive nature of the acting world and for some reason, I thought law would be a much softer area that would welcome young budding individuals with open arms.

To some extent, I was wrong. University proposes ever-widening accessibility into the legal profession. However, it also highlights the sheer number of talented prospective lawyers competing for a limited number of positions and the pressures this places on a law student, especially in the unprecedented times of Coronavirus. Because of this, throughout my educational journey, I have learnt to expect the unexpected.

University at First Glance

After finishing my A levels, the idea of moving away to pursue my ideal career was exhilarating. I foresaw myself fulfilling the stereotype of a young professional in a concrete jungle attempting to make a name for myself, whilst plagued by the adversities of everyday life, very much in Legally Blonde style. Being able to distance myself from mum and dad seemed a cruel thing to find pleasure in. Nonetheless, I did. Having come from a rural area with wide open spaces, walking into a lecture hall full of people as far as the eye can see, was a shock to the system. The university I chose at that time has a large campus, with an equally large law school. The

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university principles aimed to challenge us by distancing itself, whilst equally existing in the background if we were to need support, much like a worried parent who tries to give their child freedom.

This approach was helpful in encouraging students to communicate well and only to ask for help having considered all available strategies beforehand. However, it quickly became evident that I was not ready for this. Having experienced personal issues that interfered with my early time at university, I felt alone and lacked the confidence to ask for help. Knowing there were many students out there who were succeeding and thriving filled me with anxiety, because I was unable to do the same. Therefore, feeling unable to find a solution, I decided to come home after three months and did not return to university.

When listening to pre-university talks from ambassadors or decorated alumni, there were very few mentions as to what would happen if a student failed. The fear of having lost my only route to a career in law was heart-breaking and I had forfeited all confidence in my academic abilities. However, I slowly began to acknowledge the positives and life lessons that I had learnt. Some things in life may be suited to other people whilst not being appropriate for me, and that is fine. I had to learn to distinguish and to trust my own instinct.

I was not going to quit, as I wanted to persevere, whilst keeping what I had learnt in mind. That meant returning to university but rather than prioritising ranking and status, I realised that I should be looking for the aspects I value, such as teaching style and support services. This research led me to Plymouth University. With a much smaller student base and a compact campus, all the services offered were accessible and the School of Law presented a much stronger community feel.

The Impact of Coronavirus

Like many people across the UK, I did not comprehend the impact that Covid-19 could have on my studies. I left the campus in March 2020 following the end of face to face teaching, with the assumption that everything would be back to normal by the time we returned in September. As exam season loomed ahead, we remained in lockdown. I was devastated to hear that we would have to undertake our Public Law assessment as an online, open-book 48-hour exam, as I anticipated and enjoyed the stress of the exam hall. The online exam, however, did not fail to

deliver its fair share of stress.

The experience was very different to the 3-hour exam I was prepared for. I spent around 20 hours on the first of three questions, taking my time to deliver a well-structured essay. It then dawned on me that I had only 28 hours to complete two more questions, both of which required considerable research and dissection, whilst also finding time to eat and sleep. We also had to reference our work and with that being a first-year law student's greatest fear, the pressure mounted. Whilst the actual construction and research was a lot easier with this more flexible approach, the element of staring at a screen for 48 hours was exhausting and panic-inducing, considering that lecturers expected high-quality answers. Other background issues added to the 'at home' assessment stress. My family had previously caught Coronavirus and had only just started to see symptoms disappear. That said, the alternate exam scenario ended up benefiting me, as I achieved a high 2:1. When time is taken to get used to the new structure, it will be a fitting replacement if one keeps an open mind.

Returning to University

As September came around, we began to receive Coronavirus-related correspondence from the university. When it was announced that we were going to experience a very different teaching approach on the return to university, I was anxious and concerned. Memories of my previous experience returned, and I feared a lack of social interaction and peer support. Resentment is an understatement for how I felt, following the disruption of my plans and not just in the context of my studies. I had lost the chance to attend a mini pupillage over the summer, which would have been my first experience of a legal working environment. I had to be realistic in what I could achieve from my desk in my bedroom, with most elements of the campus and external locations remaining closed. Despite this limitation, with time and some adjustments, I have managed to get into the swing of things with my second-year studies.

I currently have 12 hours of timetabled online study a week, covering three modules in total. Initially, I found my fears of online teaching justified. There were some technology issues interfering with aspects of learning, such as Zoom links not working or Internet wavering. However, with time, technology prevailed and lecturers found creative ways to work with what they have, and provide us with information and support through various remote means. For example, lectures are recorded and available to access at a later time, which is something we

did not have with face to face teaching.

The level of commitment lecturers have put into maintaining our learning, despite facing adversities themselves, has inspired me. Having been elected chair of Debate Society, I decided to draw from this experience and deliver a platform for conversation and making friends online, with the help of the committee. Now more than ever is a time to be socially active and help others who may be struggling in the same way as I did when first attending university.

Through the Debate Society, we hold weekly debates on topics ranging from the sciences and politics to conspiracy theories. We also ran five welcome events that allowed new students the opportunity to introduce themselves to our inclusive community. Whilst some did not appreciate having to debate through a screen after a full day of online lectures, many joined purely for the fun conversations and lighthearted exchange between students, overcoming the limits of remote communication. I would like to think that with the help of my peers, we have been somewhat influential in supporting each other through a time that would have been otherwise socially bleak for many.

To Conclude

During my time at Plymouth University, I have thrived in my studies and have achieved a First-class result for stage one. The prospect of being able to reach my aspirations has become so much more real, and I finally feel a sense of belonging and maturity. I am happy that I quickly recognised my first choice of university was not compatible with my personality and style of learning. After I went back for a second attempt, I learnt that it is acceptable to try again, even in a field with such fierce competition. With no end in sight to the Coronavirus pandemic, it has become clear that students should expect the unexpected. The past few months have tested my adaptability in many ways. I cannot help but feel slightly perturbed by the lack of consistency in all elements of everyday life, with Coronavirus policy often changing, but the university has provided certainty and security for students. It is very encouraging to see so many staff communicating and working hard to make the student experience positive. The levels of support have been incredible, and I very much look forward to continuing at Plymouth University.