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# 'You're Hired: Bridging the Gap between Law Student Career Aspirations and Employment Opportunities

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**“You’re Hired!”**  
**Bridging the Gap between Law Student Career**  
**Aspirations and Employment Opportunities**

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## **Introduction**

This article considers the measures that have been put in place by the Law School at the University of Plymouth to enhance the employability of its law graduates. It also provides an analysis of the preliminary findings of a three-year longitudinal study (the Plymouth Study) that examines the career aspirations and employment opportunities of the Law School’s LLB students and explores the factors that enhance or inhibit their employability.

## **1 Graduate Employability**

Graduate employability has always been at the heart of the undergraduate law programmes at the University of Plymouth with its emphasis on embedding graduate skills development within the curriculum; on providing the opportunity for work-based learning; on encouraging extra-curricular skills development to enhance employability; and with its focus on supported career management through personal development planning and careers advice.

Graduate employability is a concept that involves more than being able to demonstrate key skills. It is defined by Yorke as:

a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Yorke, M., *Employability in Higher Education: what it is – what it is not* (HEA, April 2006) p.8. [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/resource\\_database/id336\\_employability\\_in\\_higher\\_education](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/resource_database/id336_employability_in_higher_education) (accessed 29.11.10). It is defined in a similar way by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) as ‘a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that ...ensure ...the capability of being effective in the workplace,’ CBI., *Time Well Spent. Embedding employability in work experience* (March 2007) p.11, <http://www.cbi.org.uk/pdf/timewellspent.pdf> (accessed 06.12.10)

According to the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) employability is built on a positive 'can-do' attitude underpinned by the ability for self management; team working; business and customer awareness; problem solving; communication and literacy; application of numeracy; and application of information technology.<sup>2</sup> It is these employability skills and attributes that are the most important factor for the majority of employers when recruiting graduates.<sup>3</sup> This is no less true when considered in the context of seeking employment in the legal profession. So, for example, graduates applying for trainee solicitor jobs are advised to demonstrate all of the 'soft skills' listed above in addition to the technical or 'hard skills' such as knowledge of the law and legal procedure, legal analysis and reasoning, legal research and legal drafting.<sup>4</sup>

Alongside the development of technical legal skills, development of employability attributes has been embedded within the Plymouth LLB curriculum since its inception. In particular these are part of an integrated skills stream that runs through all three stages of the degree which starts with the development of generic transferrable skills at stage 1, applies these in the specific context of professional lawyers' skills in stage 2 and culminates at stage 3 with the opportunity to engage in work based learning and other modules that demonstrate autonomy, self-directed learning and self-management. As part of work based learning, students are able to develop their skills in a practical environment through placements with private legal firms or public bodies. In addition the Law School operates the South West Employment Rights Centre (SWERC), where students, supervised by a qualified lawyer, provide legal advice and representation to the public on employment matters. In 2008 the School also set up the Innocence Project, which is part of a national network of university-based projects focusing on the wrongful conviction of innocent people. This provides

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid p.12 and also see, for example, similar skills identified by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills in *Employability Skills: A Research and Policy Briefing* (UKCES, March 2010) <http://www.ukces.org.uk/reports/employability-skills-a-research-and-policy-briefing> (accessed 30.11.10) and the attributes referred to in Harvey, L., and Knight, P., *Briefings on Employability 5: Helping departments to develop employability* (HEFCE ESECT and LTSN Generic Centre, 2003) p.6.

<sup>3</sup> 77% of employers report this being the most important factor in recruitment: CBI., *Ready to Grow: business priorities for education and skills* (Education and Skills Survey, 2010) p.7 <http://www.cbi.org.uk/pdf/2010-cbi-edi-ready-to-grow-business-priorities-for%20education-and-skills.pdf> (accessed 30.11.10).

<sup>4</sup> See for example, the key skills that graduate law recruiters look for at <http://targetjobs.co.uk/career-sectors/law-solicitors/applications-and-interviews> (accessed 30.11.10) and the top ten legal skills for a career in law listed at <http://legalcareers.about.com/od/legalcareerbasics> (accessed 30.11.10) and the discussion about the importance of soft skills in Giusti, G., *Soft Skills for Lawyers* (Chelsea Publishing London Limited, 2008)

students with the opportunity to become involved in investigating miscarriages of justice and to consider possible grounds of appeal with the support of qualified lawyers.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to embedding employability within the curriculum, students are encouraged to enhance their employability by becoming involved in volunteer work. This has included work with Victim Support, the Crown Prosecution Service, the Miscarriages of Justice Organisation, the Youth Offending Service, the local Law Centre and Citizens Advice Bureaux and the more traditional work experience with local solicitors or mini-pupillage in barrister's chambers. Students are also encouraged to become involved in the organisation of the student managed Law and Criminal Justice Society and/or its activities, many of which enhance employability skills or provide career guidance. Examples include networking events, mooting and an internal negotiation competition which has a work placement with local solicitors as its prize.

Career management is supported and encouraged through the personal development planning (PDP) process. PDP has been an important feature of the undergraduate law programmes since the late 1990s and from 2001 was embedded and assessed in core modules at stages 1 and 3. In 2007 it was also embedded in stage 2 with a specific focus on career management and planning. Career development planning originally formed a small part of the PDP assessment in stages 1 and 3 but in 2007 it became a major component of a core assessment in stage 2. Career advice sessions have also been embedded within the curriculum for some time. These are provided by the University careers service and take place during induction and in core modules in stages 1 and 2 where large group sessions and workshops are devoted to career management skills, cv writing and applying for work. These feed into the career development planning assessments in stage 2.

Law students also receive support from the university careers service and from a member of the law school academic team who acts as a careers tutor and liaises with the central service and works with local employers. In addition to a library of hard copy career information, there is a law careers' intranet site linked to useful internal and external resources related to graduate career management and planning in law and other fields. Students are also supplied with regular updates of publications and comparable electronic sources as well as details of regional and national career events, graduate vacancies and

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<sup>5</sup> More information about both SWERC and Innocence can be found in Volumes 1 and 2 of the *Plymouth Law Review*.

other work experience opportunities. There is an annual careers fair held at the university as well as annual career talks given by a variety of legal professionals, representatives from law related organisations and ex-students.

### ***Evaluation of employability measures***

Until 2007/8 student feedback on the career development provision was obtained through normal programme monitoring methods, such as student perception questionnaires which asked for a satisfaction rating for careers guidance in the course. Feedback received in this way was used to foster debate and enhance the provision. However, from 2007/8 such feedback was no longer sought through the university-wide student survey and so it was only collected at Law School level. The need to obtain more detailed and systematic student feedback in order to enable informed development to take place was one of the drivers behind the creation of the Law School student employability study.

## **2 The Plymouth Law Student Employability Study**

In September 2008 the authors<sup>6</sup> embarked on a three-year longitudinal study, examining the career aspirations and employment opportunities of the Law School's LLB students and exploring the factors that enhance or inhibit their employability. The objectives of the Plymouth Study are to identify the career aspirations, opportunities and destinations of Plymouth LLB students; to examine factors that affect any changes in aspiration, opportunity or destination; to explore the impact of measures taken to assist students in career planning and management while at the University; and to assess whether alternative or additional measures might enhance career planning and employability.

The study aims to achieve these objectives by analysing existing data drawn from personal development plans drawn up by students, from ad hoc surveys carried out by the Law School and from the annual Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education surveys. In addition annual questionnaires have been administered to students on all three stages of the LLB programme and to graduates. These aim to collect more detailed data about the career aspirations and destinations of our students as well as evaluation of the measures already adopted by the Law School to enhance student employability. These questionnaires were first administered in a pilot study in 2008/9 to existing students and to 2007/8 graduates. The questionnaires were also completed by each cohort in 2009/10 and will continue to be completed over the three year period, ending in 2011/12. It is also intended that focus group

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<sup>6</sup> At its inception Sarah Butcher, another Lecturer in Law at Plymouth, was involved in the project. Sarah left the University in 2009 and Hugo de Rijke, Associate Professor in Law at Plymouth, joined the project in 2010.

discussions will take place over the coming year and graduates are currently being contacted by telephone in order to collect data regarding employment obtained and future prospects up to three years after graduation.

### ***Preliminary findings - Graduate destinations***

Every year the University conducts a survey of its previous year's graduates to find out what they are doing six months after graduation.<sup>7</sup> This survey of the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (the DLHE survey) collects data about whether graduates are employed and/or whether they have gone on to further study. DLHE is designed by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA<sup>8</sup>) and asks for details about any employment and further study, training or research and gathers information about the circumstances of and reasons for choosing a particular path post graduation. The data collected by the University is coded and anonymous statistical data is provided as part of programme monitoring. The statistics are also sent to HESA who publish a summary of what is happening at a national level. This enables the public to compare graduate destinations data from each institution and the statistics are also used as part of the criteria in drawing up the annual university league tables.<sup>9</sup>

The Complete University Guide declares that these statistics on graduate prospects are 'a measure of the employability of a university's graduates.'<sup>10</sup> However, it is by no means clear that it is desirable to assess the effectiveness of measures intended to enhance employability by reference to statistics on graduate prospects and employment. For example, Lee Harvey and Peter Knight argue that 'employability – having the attributes to succeed in employment – is significantly different from actually getting employment, which is affected by a range of extraneous factors.'<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless examination of the DLHE statistics

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<sup>7</sup> At the time of publication the latest figures available are for students who graduated in June 2009.

<sup>8</sup> HESA is the official agency for the collection, analysis and dissemination of quantitative information about higher education <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/>. Further details about the DLHE survey can be found on their website at <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/content/view/98/137/>.

<sup>9</sup> For example, these statistics are used to calculate 'career prospects' in *The Guardian*, 'graduate prospects' in the *Complete University Guide* and in *The Times Good University Guide*, and 'employment' in the *Sunday Times*. However, the statistics need to be treated with caution because the same calculation method is not always used and the terminology used is not always self-evident. For example, 'employment' is based on the percentage employed in graduate jobs and excludes not only the unemployed but also the percentage employed in non-graduate jobs. 'Career prospects' and 'graduate prospects' on the other hand are based not just on the percentage going into graduate jobs but also include those going into full time study.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/single.htm?ipg=8726> (accessed 30.11.10).

<sup>11</sup> Harvey and Knight, *Briefings on Employability* 5, p.5. [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/tla/employability/briefing\\_5\\_helping\\_departments\\_%20to\\_develop\\_employability.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/tla/employability/briefing_5_helping_departments_%20to_develop_employability.pdf) (accessed 29.11.10).

raises questions that the Plymouth Study seeks to answer by exploring in more detail the destinations of its LLB graduates and their reasons for making choices about what to do.

An examination of the DLHE statistics for law graduates at Plymouth, in Table 1 below, shows that over the last three years, in common with the national trend for law graduates and for graduates more generally, there has been an increase in the percentage reporting themselves to be 'unemployed and looking for employment, further study or training'. Nevertheless it should not be forgotten that, despite the recession and economic downturn which began towards the end of 2007, a substantial percentage of between 91% to 95% have been employed or engaged in further study six months after graduation.

**TABLE 1: UNEMPLOYMENT RATE OF PLYMOUTH LAW GRADUATES<sup>12</sup>**

<b>YEAR OF GRADUATION</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>Number unemployed</b>	<b>Percentage unemployed</b>
<b>2004/5</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2005/6</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2006/7</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2007/8</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2008/9</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>

The increase in unemployment amongst Plymouth law graduates is almost exactly in line with the percentage of all graduates reporting themselves to be unemployed as shown in Table 2 below. It has, however, been slightly higher than the national average for law graduates as shown in the Table. It is possible that this is due to regional factors affecting employment prospects but this hypothesis needs further investigation through the Plymouth Study. Moreover, the statistics for Plymouth, reproduced here, are based on drilling down into the HESA DLHE data to identify the responses of LLB and BSc Law Major students. It is not particularly helpful to compare these statistics with the national statistics for law because the latter are based on the more general data that combines returns from institutions that only have LLB graduates, those that have graduates from a range of law degrees and even includes some with degrees in criminology and criminal justice studies. The difference in qualification is likely to affect the nature of graduate destination and so comparison may be

<sup>12</sup> These figures, based on HESA DHLE data collected 6 months after graduation, are for LLB and BSc Law Major graduates combined. The equivalent figures for just the LLB are 2004/5 7% (3 of 43), 2005/6 3.5% (2 of 57), 2006/7 3.5% (2 of 57), 2007/8 6% (4 of 64) and 2008/9 10.6% (7 of 66).

misleading unless it is done only between institutions with graduate returns for similar programmes.

**TABLE 2: COMPARISON OF UNEMPLOYMENT RATES SIX MONTHS AFTER GRADUATION**

YEAR OF GRADUATION	% of Plymouth law graduates who are unemployed	% of all graduates who are unemployed <sup>13</sup>	% of all law graduates who are unemployed
2004/5	6	6.2	4 <sup>14</sup>
2005/6	7	6	3.9 <sup>15</sup>
2006/7	5	5.5	n/a <sup>16</sup>
2007/8	8	7.9	5.5 <sup>17</sup>
2008/9	9	8.9	6.2 <sup>18</sup>

Traditionally, when surveyed six months after graduation, national statistics show that more law graduates go on to further study or training and less go into employment than is average for graduates generally. So for example, 38.7% of all 2008/9 law graduates chose to go on to further study compared with an overall graduate average of 15.3%.<sup>19</sup> This is not surprising because many law graduates aspire to enter the legal profession and so need to go on to further study in order to qualify as solicitors or barristers. The position at Plymouth is no different as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

<sup>13</sup> Figures for 2006/7-2008/9 obtained from *What Do Graduates Do? 2010* (HESCU and AGCAS, March 2010) p.6, [http://www.prospects.ac.uk/assets/assets/documents/wdgd\\_2010.pdf](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/assets/assets/documents/wdgd_2010.pdf) (accessed 07.12.10). 2004/5-2005/6 obtained from the HESCU and AGCAS annual reports at [http://www.hecsu.ac.uk/research\\_reports.htm](http://www.hecsu.ac.uk/research_reports.htm) (accessed 07.12.10)

<sup>14</sup> [http://www2.prospects.ac.uk/cms/ShowPage/Home\\_page/What\\_did\\_2005\\_graduates\\_do/Social\\_sciences\\_editorial/plfkbpfj](http://www2.prospects.ac.uk/cms/ShowPage/Home_page/What_did_2005_graduates_do/Social_sciences_editorial/plfkbpfj) (accessed 29.11.10)

<sup>15</sup> [http://www2.prospects.ac.uk/cms/ShowPage/Home\\_page/What\\_did\\_2006\\_graduates\\_do/Social\\_sciences\\_editorial/plfkbmmkc](http://www2.prospects.ac.uk/cms/ShowPage/Home_page/What_did_2006_graduates_do/Social_sciences_editorial/plfkbmmkc) (accessed 29.11.10)

<sup>16</sup> The prospects website does not contain the figures for 2006/7 and it has not been possible at this point to obtain these from HESA

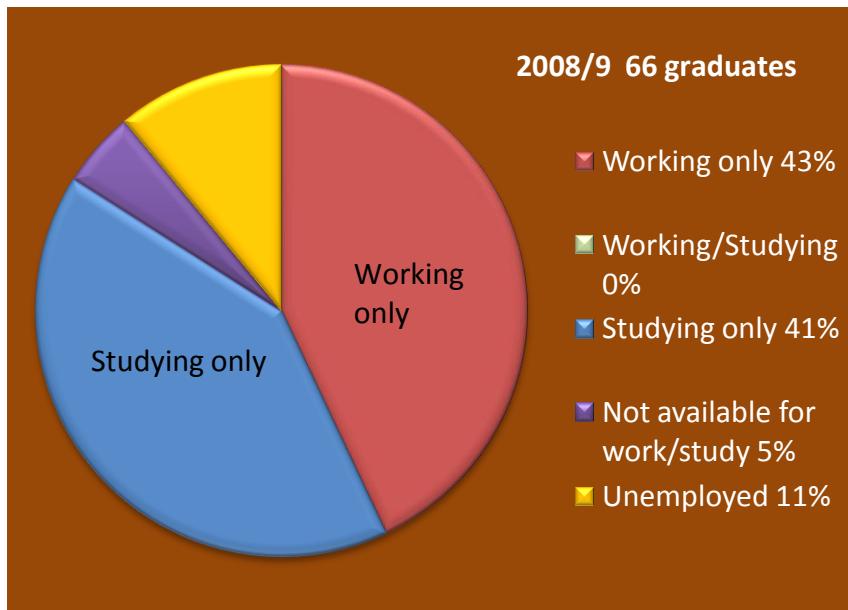
<sup>17</sup> [http://www.prospects.ac.uk/what\\_do\\_graduates\\_do\\_law.htm](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/what_do_graduates_do_law.htm) (accessed 29.11.10)

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.prospects.ac.uk/assets/assets/documents/wdgd\\_2010.pdf](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/assets/assets/documents/wdgd_2010.pdf) (accessed 29.11.10)

<sup>19</sup> A further 11.3% of 2008/9 law graduates went on to employment and study and 35.4% went into just employment: <http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/wdgd> (accessed 29.11.10)



**FIGURE 1: WHAT 2008/9 PLYMOUTH LLB GRADUATES DID AFTER GRADUATION<sup>20</sup>**

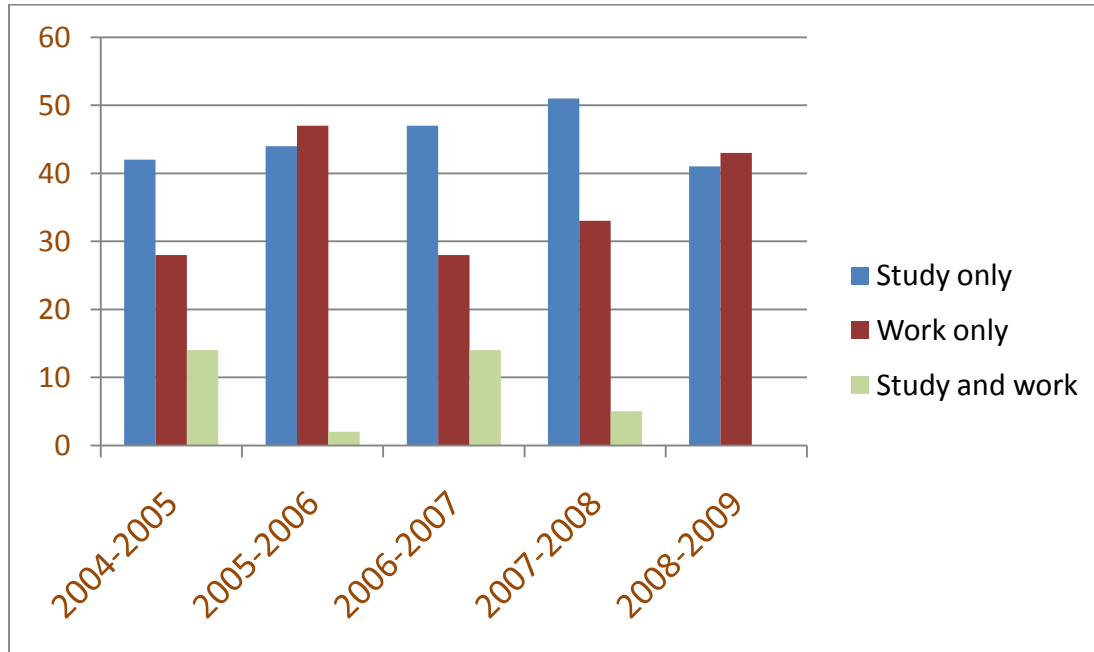


Further examination of the data, shown in Figure 2 below, suggests a similar pattern in the balance between those going on to further study or training after graduation and those going into employment over the last five years. However, the balance in 2008/9 shifted slightly from the previous two years with less graduates going into further study than work (or study and work) than has previously been the case. Again this may not be surprising given the economic climate and the amount of student debt often incurred by the end of an undergraduate degree course.<sup>21</sup> This may lead more students into seeking employment straight after graduation to repay debts and/or to secure funding for the next stage of their training. Whether this is the explanation and whether these graduates will progress to further study later or whether their career aspirations have changed are all matters that the longitudinal Plymouth study seeks to ascertain.

<sup>20</sup> The published HESA (DHLE) figures for law at Plymouth differ from those provided here because they include LLB, Law and Criminal Justice graduates while the figures provided here are for LLB graduates only.

<sup>21</sup> The level and impact of debt amongst law graduates is discussed in the findings of the longitudinal study by Cuthbert, M., *Law Student 2000* (<http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/research/projects/cuthbert2.html>, accessed 03.10.09) and two studies published by the Law Society: Norman, L., *Career Choices in Law: A Survey of Law Students* (Research Study 50, Law Society 2004) and Norman, L., *Career Choices in Law: A Survey of Trainee Solicitors* (Research Study 51, Law Society 2004) found at <http://www.lawsociety.org.uk/aboutlawsociety/whatwedo/researchandtrends/researchpubs/view=researchpubsarticle.law?PUBLICATIONID=216816> and <http://www.lawsociety.org.uk/aboutlawsociety/whatwedo/researchandtrends/researchpubs/view=researchpubsarticle.law?PUBLICATIONID=216837> (accessed 03.10.09)

**FIGURE 2: COMPARISON OF PLYMOUTH LLB GRADUATE DESTINATION DATA  
2004/5-2008/9**

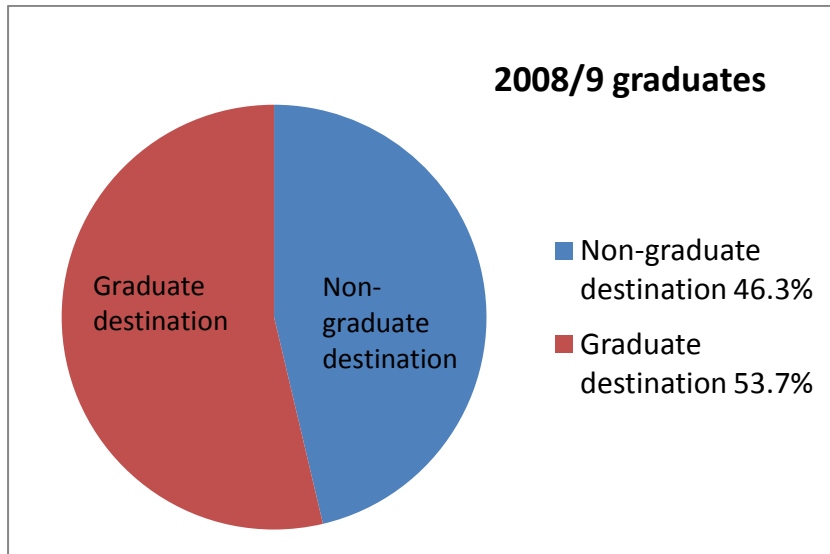


One further factor highlighted by the national data is of particular interest and is now also the subject of further research as part of the Plymouth study. This relates to the number of Plymouth law graduates who are in graduate level employment and/or study as opposed to non graduate level employment and/or study six months after graduation.<sup>22</sup> This is the data on graduate prospects that is used in one form or another in the university league tables.

As can be seen in Figure 3 below, slightly more of the 2008/9 law graduates (53.7%) went into graduate level employment and/or study than went into a non graduate level destination. However this is a drop in the percentage going into graduate level destinations which fell to 53.7% from 56.23% (2007/8 graduates) and 63.75% (2006/7 graduates). The reasons for this are unclear and are being explored as part of the Plymouth study.

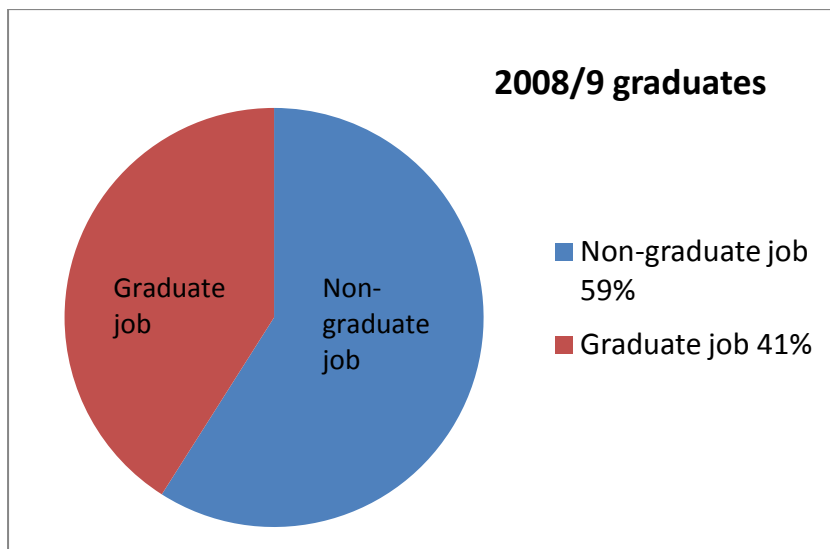
<sup>22</sup> When coding occupational information collected in the DHLE survey, occupations are classified as either graduate or non-graduate according to the SOC2000 Standard Occupational Classification which is based on the classifications developed by Elias, P., and Purcell, K., in *Seven Years On: Graduate Careers in a Changing Labour Market* (IER/ESRU/ESRC/HECSU, June 2004) [www.hecsu.ac.uk](http://www.hecsu.ac.uk) (accessed 28.11.10)

**FIGURE 3: PLYMOUTH LAW GRADUATE PROSPECTS**



When, as in Figure 4, the graduates going into further study are removed and the focus is simply on graduates who were in employment six months after graduation, the data shows that more went into non-graduate level occupations than into graduate ones.<sup>23</sup>

**FIGURE 4: PLYMOUTH LAW GRADUATE OCCUPATION**



<sup>23</sup> The percentage in graduate occupations appears however to have increased from the previous year, when 35% of the 2007/8 graduates went into graduate occupations compared with 65% in non graduate occupations.

The Plymouth study aims to explore why this might be the case and will consider the implications of any factors that prove to be relevant. Factors that are currently being examined include:

- The relationship between student entry qualifications and/or their degree classification and the prospect of securing a graduate occupation.
- The relationship between short and long term career aspiration and whether those entering non-graduate occupations view their employment as a temporary step towards achieving a longer term career goal by, for example, securing the finance to pursue further study. Such graduates may not seek graduate occupations which may be viewed as more permanent forms of employment.
- The extent to which Plymouth law graduates are sufficiently aware of the transferable nature of their skills and attributes and of the graduate occupations that are open to them or for which they might be suited. There is, for example, some evidence from a project carried out in 1998 amongst LLB graduates at the University of Leeds that students may not be aware of their transferrable skills and/or may not be sure how far these would be valued in employment outside law.<sup>24</sup>
- The extent to which the opportunity to secure employment in a graduate occupation is effected by socio-economic factors, including the relevance of geographic region and graduate mobility. A higher proportion of graduates from the South West remain in the South West to work than move to other regions<sup>25</sup> and leavers are more likely to be employed in the same region if they were previously domiciled in the region.<sup>26</sup> Given that 77% of the employed 2008/9 graduates from the University of Plymouth were working in the South West six months after graduation<sup>27</sup> and that the law programmes recruit a higher percentage of students from the South West than from any other region<sup>28</sup> it seems

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<sup>24</sup> See Bell, J., and Johnstone, J., *General transferable skills report* (Law Discipline Network, 1998) <http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/resources/learning-and-learner-support/ldn/> (accessed 30.11.10)

<sup>25</sup> So for example, 56% of those graduating in the South West in 2007 were working in the South West six months after graduation: Ball C., 'Graduate mobility? Who goes to work in each region?', (*Graduate Market Trends*, 2008) p16 <http://www.prospectsnet.com> (accessed 30.11.10)

<sup>26</sup> 60.5% of those graduating in 2005 who were previously domiciled in the South West were working in the South West by 2008 according to *Destinations of Leavers from HEIs Longitudinal Study of the 2004/5 cohort* (HESA, 2009) p22

<sup>27</sup> According to the institutional DHLE data for 2008/9

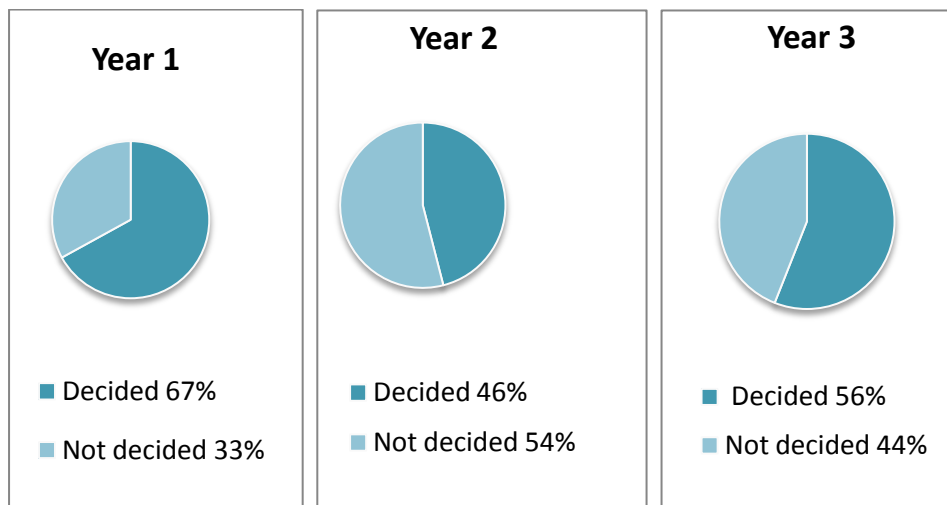
<sup>28</sup> For example 50% of the year 1 intake in 2008/9 came from Devon and Cornwall and 21% came from the rest of the South West.

likely that most Plymouth law graduates will seek employment in the region rather than elsewhere. This may impact on the availability of graduate occupations.

### ***Preliminary findings – Career aspirations***

Not all law students intend to pursue a career in law or in the legal profession but previous surveys have found that a substantial percentage do have this intention. In 2000 a longitudinal study of the aspirations of a cohort of law students at over 40 law schools found 92% of the year 1 students surveyed intended to pursue a legal career.<sup>29</sup> In 2004 a survey of year 2 and 3 law students across 14 law schools found that 82% intended to pursue a legal career.<sup>30</sup> The 2008/9 survey of Plymouth LLB students captures the career aspiration of 33 year 1 students, 46 year 2 students and 25 year 3 students. Initial analysis of the results suggests that a higher percentage of Plymouth students had not decided what career they wanted when they started their degree.

**FIGURE 5: PERCENTAGE OF PLYMOUTH LLB STUDENTS WHO HAD DECIDED ON A CAREER WHEN THEY STARTED THEIR DEGREE (2008/9)**



Of those Plymouth LLB students who had decided on a career almost all intended to go into legal practice. This accounted for 100% of year 1 responses, 86% of year 2 and 100% of year 3. A higher percentage of these students intended to become a solicitor (86%, 71% and

<sup>29</sup> Cuthbert, M., 'Law Student 2000: prelude to the finale', (*Directions* 7, Autumn 2003) <http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/resources/directions/previous/issue7/> (accessed 03.10.09)

<sup>30</sup> Norman, L., *Career Choices in Law: A Survey of Law Students* (Research Study 50, Law Society 2004) p24 <http://www.lawsociety.org.uk/aboutlawsociety/whatwedo/researchandtrends/researchpubs/view=researchpubsarticle.law?PUBLICATIONID=216816> (accessed 03.10.09)

64% respectively) than a barrister (0%, 15%, 22% respectively).<sup>31</sup> An additional 14% in year 1 and 14% in year 3 indicated that they intended to become a lawyer without indicating in what capacity.

However, several of those who had decided on a career had changed their mind while at university. 36% of year 1, 46% of year 2 and 52% of year 3 had changed their mind. It is interesting to note that the percentage changing their mind increases according to the stage of study. It seems likely that students change their mind about their career as they progress through their studies but this cannot be confirmed until the longitudinal aspect of the study is complete.<sup>32</sup>

Given that the career aspiration of some students changes during their degree, the Plymouth study aims to find out why. Respondents were asked to indicate what had caused the change in their career plans and responses were themed. The most common responses are contained in Table 3.

**TABLE 3: REASONS FOR CHANGING CAREER PLANS**

FACTOR	Yr 1 of 12	Yr 2 of 26	Yr 3 of 13	TOTAL Overall %
Studying law discouraged me from being a lawyer	2	5	2	18
Level of competition discouraged me	1	5	1	14
Studying law encouraged me to be a lawyer	1	3	2	12
Research into range of career paths	2	3		10
Economic climate	1		3	8
Career lectures/advice	3		1	8
Networking/socials		3		6
Put off by the workload of lawyers	1	1		4
Work experience	1	1		4
Got better grades than expected	1		1	4

Students were also asked to list up to three factors that had made pursuing their chosen career easier and three that had made it more difficult. There were a great number of

<sup>31</sup> These findings are similar to those of Norman, L., *supra* n30.

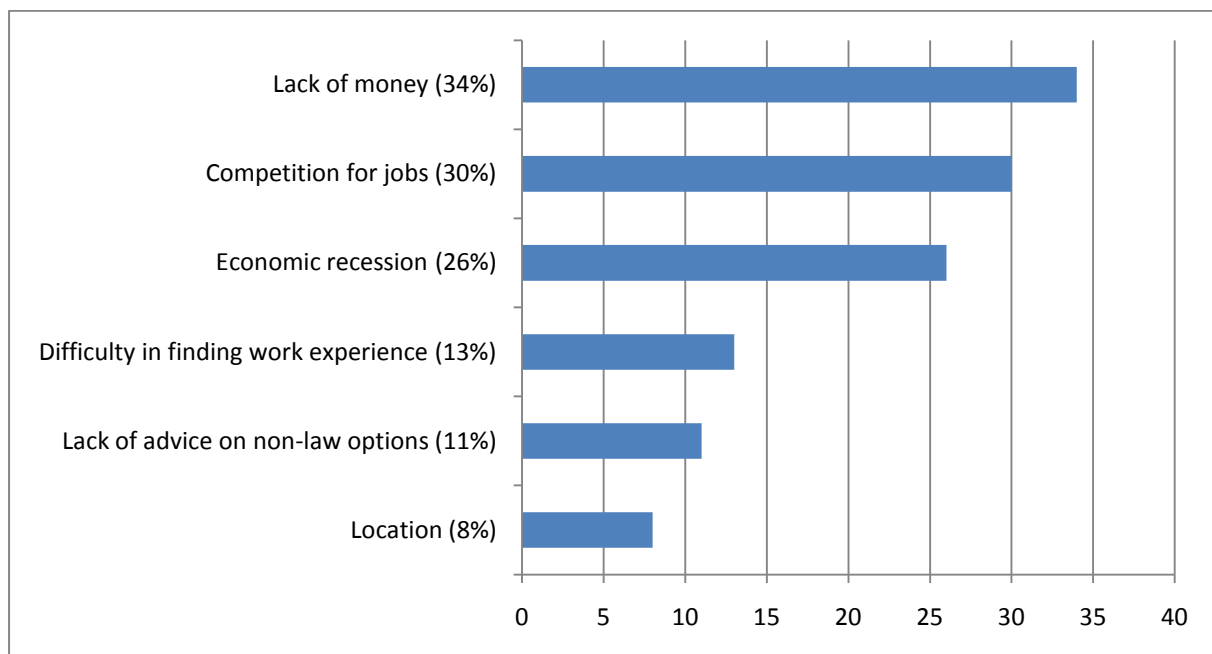
<sup>32</sup> The same point is made by Bone, A., 'The Twenty-First Century Law Student' (2009) 43(3) *The Law Teacher* 222 at 229

different factors identified as having made it easier but five, in particular, were identified by a significant number of the 92 respondents. These were

- Study of the subject (25). This was identified by all three years as a major factor.
- Work experience (22). This was identified most heavily by year 3 as might be expected given the availability of work based learning in year 3
- Networking/graduate fairs/socials (21). These were identified as a significant factor by all three years but more so by years 1 and 3
- Skills based modules (15). These were identified most by year 1 students
- Careers service and advice (13). More year 1 and 3 students than year 2 students identified this as a factor.

There was much less variation in the inhibitors that were identified.

**FIGURE 6: FACTORS THAT INHIBITED THE PURSUIT OF A CHOSEN CAREER**



These responses have similarities to those reported by Cuthbert and Norman. Cuthbert<sup>33</sup> found that the main reasons given by respondents in their final year for not seeking a career in the legal profession were cost and competition. Norman<sup>34</sup> found that the main two reasons given by law students for choosing not to pursue a career as a solicitor or barrister were

<sup>33</sup> Cuthbert, M., 'Law Student 2000: prelude to the finale'

<sup>34</sup> Norman, L., *Career Choices in Law: A Survey of Law Students*

inability to afford the cost and that obtaining a training contract was too difficult. Most of the remainder had decided that law no longer interested or suited them.

One valuable feature of the longitudinal nature of the Plymouth study is that analysis of the 2009/10 and 2010/11 data will also enable examination of whether student's career aspirations change any further over the course of their three years of study or post graduation and if so, why.

***Preliminary findings – Evaluation of measures taken to assist in career development and employability***

Respondents to the surveys were asked to rate how helpful<sup>35</sup> they had found particular measures taken to provide career advice and development planning. The 2008/9 surveys suggest that some resources available to students, such as the provision of mock interviews and the university career website, are under-utilised. All three years rated work or vacation experience, advice on drawing up cvs, attending the law career fair and career talks given by visiting speakers as the most useful aspects of the provision. Career talks given by the career's service were rated as useful by years 1 and 2 (the talks are not given to year 3) and all but one of the respondents who had undertaken the work based learning module in year 3 rated it useful or very useful. Career based activities in other modules were rated as useful and the majority of year 1 respondents found the career planning assessments (part of PDP) useful but years 2 and 3 were less enthusiastic. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most highly rated activity with over 84% of each year ranking it as useful or very useful was personal career research.

### **3 Conclusions**

So far, data collected through the Plymouth study has enhanced our understanding of the career aspirations of our LLB students and the factors that impact on those aspirations but the preliminary findings have also raised many questions about aspiration and graduate destinations that the longitudinal study will seek to explore.

Whilst student evaluation of existing career development provision has been largely positive, factors identified by the research have already been used to inform and initiate change

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<sup>35</sup> The choices were very useful, useful, limited use, no use or not available/not used.



within the law curriculum and to foster changes to practice within the Law School. For example, feedback from the student surveys about how useful personal development planning assessments had been in assisting career development was instrumental in changes being made to the way in which this was managed in order to provide a more personalised approach. The research has also identified the need to encourage students to access a number of under-utilised resources and has led to further development of the law career website. Moreover, statistics on graduate occupations, feedback on factors that have inhibited the pursuit of a chosen career and suggestions made by respondents about the ways in which we might improve what we do has opened a debate about how we prepare students for a graduate career outside the legal profession.

Finally there is still a lot of data analysis to do, not least because the survey returns from the 2007/8 and 2008/9 graduates have not yet been analysed. It is hoped that this aspect of the longitudinal study will provide us with a more accurate picture of graduate destinations after any temporary employment and further study or training as well as providing an insight into any changes in career aspiration or impediments to opportunity post graduation.