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Are we doing this right? Graduate Outcomes and Undergraduate Law Degrees

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Are we doing this right? Graduate Outcomes and Undergraduate Law Degrees

Abstract

This paper offers reflections on graduate outcomes for those studying undergraduate law degrees. We consider how, in our modern neoliberal university setting, academic outcomes and vocational outcomes often co-exist but with one or the other taking priority depending on institution and context. We use the contrast in our experiences, with one of us being a former legal practitioner who has spent the majority of her career in vocationally focused institutions and has recently moved into a more academic context, and the other who has been explicit about her position as an 'academic academic' but has held several senior roles in post 1992 and career led institutions, to explore different contexts and ask questions of some of the published student data. Employing a reflective methodology based on conversations (both face to face and via emails and chats), we note that some of the published graduate outcomes data does not tell the full story and argue that while there are multiple ways of 'doing law degrees right' even if the 'right' may look very different in different contexts, there is a lack of honesty and transparency about the likely outcomes of undertaking a law degree at different institutions and that until we are honest about these differences, we are in fact doing it wrong.

1. Introduction

Undergraduate law degrees occupy a distinctive and often contested space within UK higher education.[1] They are simultaneously academic programmes, pathways into professional qualification, and cultural markers of intellectual prestige. In recent years, the increasing focus on graduate outcomes has reshaped how institutions articulate the purpose of the LLB and how they imagine the "ideal" law graduate.[2] Graduate outcomes

[1] The is a lot of writing on these issues. See for example contributions to the following volumes and the plethora of writing they refer to: Rachel Ann Dunn, Paul Maharg and Victoria Roper (Eds), *What is Legal Education for?* (Routledge 2022); Emma Jones and Fiona Cownie (Eds), *Key Directions in Legal Education* (Routledge 2020), Chris Ashford, Nigel Duncan and Jessica Guth (Eds), *Perspectives on Legal Education* (Routledge 2016

[2] Wong, B., Chiu, Y. L. T., Copsey-Blake, M., & Nikolopoulou, M. (2022). A mapping of graduate attributes: what can we expect from UK university students? *Higher Education Research & Development*, *41*(4), 1340–1355. Ryan, F. (2024). *'To be generic or to be specific, that is the graduate attribute question':*

now sit at the centre of curriculum design, quality assurance and institutional strategy for some institutions, functioning as indicators of value for students, employers and regulators.[3] Yet despite their rise in importance, the role graduate outcomes play in shaping aspects of law degrees across the sector, and why this matters, remains insufficiently explored. This paper aims to offer a starting point for this work.

Graduate outcomes are not neutral markers or descriptors of skills or competencies.[4] They are markers that encode assumptions about what matters in legal education and what kinds of graduates institutions aim to produce. They are, in fact, often not about skills and competencies at all but about far less tangible and measurable social capital and fit. In a neoliberal university environment, where employability metrics and market positioning exert significant pressure,[5] rhetoric around graduate outcomes often emphasise attributes associated with productivity, adaptability and career readiness.[6] The all-important metric is then focused on the proportion of students who, after a defined but arbitrary amount of time, have secured employment in a defined but arbitrary category of job classified as highly skilled (or are in postgraduate level study). In fact, in some Higher Education (HE) circles, when we talk of graduate outcomes, we are actually talking of the very narrow graduate outcomes metric as defined by the Office for Students.[7] This emphasis on what happens very soon after the degree and in employment terms only can sit uneasily alongside traditional academic values of critical inquiry, disciplinary depth and intellectual independence.[8] The narrow focus means that wider graduate attributes which are more often framed in values rather than in occupations, even where these are articulated clearly by institutions, are implicitly positioned as less important. They are less celebrated than, for example, the star student who secured a position in a magic circle law firm. Who you are as a graduate therefore becomes less important than the activity you are carrying out 15 months after you finished the degree. The result is a landscape in which academic outcomes and vocational outcomes coexist, but not always comfortably. Depending on institutional mission, student demographics and local professional ecosystems, one orientation may explicitly dominate, but even where this is not the case, employability after the degree is

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exploring legal academics', law graduates' and legal employers' perceptions of graduate attributes. [Doctoral Thesis, Lancaster University]. Lancaster University. https://doi.org/10.17635/lancaster/thesis/2373

[3] Office for Students *Conditions of Registration* (OfS 2026 available at Conditions of registration - Office for Students; QAA, *Subject Benchmark Statement: Law* (QAA 2023).

[4] Wald, N., & Harland, T. (2019). Graduate attributes frameworks or powerful knowledge? *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, *41*(4), 361–374.

[5] ibid

[6] Ibid, See also Roger Brown and Helen Carasso, *Everything for Sale? The Marketisation of UK Higher Education* (Routledge 2013).

[7] For a critique of different ways of thinking about graduate outcomes as well as classifying jobs see for example Hunt W, Baldauf B, Lyonette C. Horses for Courses: Subject Differences in the Chances of Securing Different Types of Graduate Jobs in the UK. *Journal of Social Policy*. 2025;54(1):228-248.

[8] Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (Penguin 2012).

always seen as a key metric and important graduate outcome, whereas we suspect that most graduates would struggle to list the graduate attributes their institutions claim their graduates to have developed.

The tension we see when considering graduate outcomes and graduate attributes in law is not new. It speaks to the age-old debate in legal education as to what it is for.[9] We do not want to rehash that debate here. Others have outlined it much more eloquently than we could, both historically and more recently.[10] Instead, in this article, we want to use our lived experience and reflections to explore how the focus on graduate outcomes and the existence of less tangible graduate attributes play out in different contexts and how they might be shaped by institutions, teachers and student cohorts. Our contrasting experiences illuminate how our own background and institutional context shape our approach to graduate outcomes on both a practical level and a theoretical one. XXXX, a former legal practitioner, has spent most of her career in vocationally focused institutions where graduate outcomes are tightly aligned with employability and for law that means legal practice readiness and professional standards. OOOO has long positioned herself as an "academic academic", starting her career in environments where interdisciplinary scholarly inquiry, theoretical depth and critical engagement were central and employability barely featured. This grounding in academic research rather than legal practice shaped how she has thought about teaching law and about how to frame what happens after graduation. Following moves into post-1992 institutions with a greater focus on an employability agenda and employability skills teaching linked explicitly to employability outcomes, and further moves into career-led and vocationally focused institutions have required a shift in thinking.

Before developing our argument further, we must be clear that we are making some assumptions and are coming from a particular point of view which is in itself contested. We are in agreement that law degrees are not the training ground for future lawyers. We agree that law degrees provide one possible route but that there are others, and we also agree that studying law (or indeed any subject) should not be all about the graduate outcome in employment terms. We therefore fundamentally disagree with the current neoliberal context in which higher education operates, and we say a little more about this below. However, we also firmly believe that we need and want to do the best for our students. We therefore need to engage with the employability and graduate outcomes agenda so that we can help our students navigate it in a meaningful way. If we want to push back against the framework we are set, then we first need to fully understand the

[9] For example William Twining, *Pericles and the Plumber* (Queens University 1967); Peter Birks, *Pressing Problems in the Law: Volume 2: What is the Law School for?* (OUP 1996); Anthony Bradney *Conversations, Choices and Chances* (Hart 2003)*;* Dunn et al above note 1

[10] ibid

framework, how it operates in different contexts and its impact. This article is an attempt to begin that learning and push back.

Our argument proceeds as follows. We first outline our understanding of graduate outcomes and graduate attributes as well as the employability agenda in their context, thinking about their purpose and the ways in which they are contested. We then present some initial reflections which prompted us to consider published data from the Office for Students (OfS) and Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) as well as other sources. Considering the data prompted further reflections, which we outline in the final sections before offering some thoughts on what we need to do to ensure we are in fact 'doing this right'.

2. Graduate Outcomes in Context: Policy, Contestation and Purpose

In legal education, graduate outcomes influence, albeit in different ways in different institutions, curriculum structures, assessment strategies and institutional narratives about what law degrees are for. Understanding their role requires situating them within the policy frameworks that have elevated them, the debates that contest their use, and the purposes they are assumed to serve.

Graduate attributes and graduate outcomes data have been a feature of higher education for some time. The Quality Assurance Agency's Subject Benchmark Statements, including the Law Benchmark, articulate expectations for knowledge, skills and attributes that graduates should possess.[11] These benchmarks, while not prescriptive, have become influential reference points for curriculum design and programme approval.[12] These listed attributes serve as a useful tool to help think about what it is that graduates in a particular discipline can do while acknowledging the wide variety of job roles and careers those graduates might take. In addition, institutions have developed their own graduate attributes to showcase what makes a graduate from institution A different (better?) to a graduate from institution B.[13] More recently though, the Office for Students (OfS) has increasingly foregrounded the outcomes of degree study, particularly employment and progression metrics as indicators of institutional

[11] QAA, *Subject Benchmark Statement: Law* (QAA 2023).
[12] Ashford, C. (2024). The Quality Assurance Agency Law Subject Benchmark Statement 2023. *The Law Teacher*, *58*(3), 421–427. Biggerstaff, M. K., & Lowery, C. (2024). Student voice in response to the new QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Law. *The Law Teacher*, *58*(4), 632–637. Vaughan, Steven; (2025) England (regulation of legal education). In: Emma, Jones and Fiona, Cownie and Anthony, Bradney, (eds.) Concise Encyclopedia of Legal Education. (pp. 152-155). Edward Elgar: Cheltenham, UK.
[13] Wong, B., Chiu, Y. L. T., Copsey-Blake, M., & Nikolopoulou, M. (2022). A mapping of graduate attributes: what can we expect from UK university students? *Higher Education Research & Development*, *41*(4), 1340–1355.

quality and value for money for students.[14] The OfS's regulatory framework positions graduate outcomes, perceived as progression into a job (ideally a graduate level job) or postgraduate study as evidence of "successful" provision, linking them to funding, compliance and reputational standing.[15]

These developments reflect a broader shift towards performance-based accountability in higher education. Graduate outcomes are used not only to guide educational design but also to justify institutional existence within a competitive market. They are embedded in league tables, marketing materials and strategic plans. For law schools, this means that outcomes are often interpreted through the lens of employability in the legal sector, professional readiness and alignment with the expectations of legal employers.[16] The question has become one about how many of an institutions graduates become solicitors or barristers and not a questions about the knowledge, skills and values the graduates hold.

Graduate outcomes are, however, contested.[17] Outcomes frameworks, such as the one framed by the OfS, risk narrowing the purpose of higher education by privileging measurable securing of a job or place on a postgraduate course over actual competencies, intellectual development, curiosity and critical engagement.[18] In legal education, this tension is not new and rehashes the old debates as to the purpose of undergraduate law degrees. Law is both a vocational discipline and an academic field, and attempts to codify its "outcomes" has, deliberately or otherwise, privileged law as a vocational degree, the best outcome of which is securing work as a legal professional.

There is a neoliberal logic underpinning outcomes-based approaches, which reflect market priorities rather than disciplinary values and which position degrees as a stepping stone to individual success in the labour market.[19] A focus on graduate outcomes in the

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[14] Office for Students, *Regulatory Framework* (OfS 2018). Mahon, D. The Role of Graduate Attributes in Higher Education. A Review of the Issues Associated with Graduate Attributes and the case for their Measurement. *Interchange* **53**, 353–369 (2022).

[15] ibid

[16] Ryan, F. (2024). *'To be generic or to be specific, that is the graduate attribute question': exploring legal academics', law graduates' and legal employers' perceptions of graduate attributes*. [Doctoral Thesis, Lancaster University]. Lancaster University. Francis A and Sommerlad H, 'Access to Legal Work and the Reproduction of Hierarchy in the Profession' (2009) 16 IJLP 63.

[17] Michael Tomlinson and Leonard Holmes (Eds) *Graduate Employability in Context* (Palgrave MacMillan 2017); Päivi Siivonen et al (eds) *Rethinking Graduate Employability in Context* (Palgrave Macmillan 2023)

[18] Collini S, *What Are Universities For?* (Penguin 2012).

[19] Thornton, 'The New Knowledge Economy and the Transformation of the Law Discipline' in Eyal Katvan, Carole Silver & Neta Ziv (eds), Too Many Lawyers? The Future of the Legal Profession, Routledge, London & New York, 2016; Brown R and Carasso H, *Everything for Sale? The Marketisation of UK Higher Education* (Routledge 2013). Thornton, M. *Privatising the Public University: The Case of Law*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, 2012

narrow sense can become instruments of managerial control, shaping curricula in ways that prioritise employability metrics over pedagogical richness.[20] As well as privileging legal employability over other types of work, graduate outcomes also reinforce existing hierarchies within the legal profession. Employability skills teaching in law schools often emphasise commercial awareness, professional networking and understanding the business of law, and this focus aligns more closely with corporate practice than with public interest law or academic pathways. In other words, our focus on graduate outcomes often presents us with quite a narrow picture of who a successful graduate actually is, and that is the picture our law schools project out into the world, ignoring the ambitions and aspirations of our students and limiting the visibility of what is possible before they have even begun their degree journeys. Graduate outcomes do not simply describe competencies; they shape how institutions imagine the "ideal" graduate. Outcomes as we present them – whether through the alumni we celebrate or the statistics we share at open days, signal what is valued, what is possible and what is expected. They influence how students understand their place within the law school and how and where they envision their future selves. A narrow focus on graduate outcomes as employability risks marginalising students whose identities, ambitions or backgrounds do not align with dominant professional narratives.

In more vocationally focused institutions, graduate attributes and programme learning outcomes often emphasise client-facing skills, ethical awareness and readiness for professional qualification as well as professional readiness and alignment with regulatory expectations. In more academically oriented institutions, emphasis is more likely to foreground research literacy, theoretical engagement and critical analysis, fostering intellectual independence, critical engagement and disciplinary belonging.[21] Students learn not only from what is taught but how it is taught, where emphasis is placed and from what is not mentioned, as well as from how their teachers navigate the vocational/academic divide. We might therefore expect that research-intensive institutions perform less well in employability terms because there is less emphasis on employability skills and professional readiness. Of course, those of us working in the sector know well that this is not actually the case, and we turn to our experience of

[20] Gruber, T. (2014). Academic sell-out: How an obsession with metrics and rankings is damaging academia. Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, 24(2), 165–177; On how audit cultures and tracking of metrics can impact academia see for example Bradney, Anthony. "The Quality Assurance Agency and the Politics of Audit." *Journal of Law and Society*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2001, pp. 430–42. Shore C and Wright S, 'Audit Culture and Anthropology' (1999) 59 JRAI 557

[21] Ryan 2024 above note 2; Sullivan W and others, *Educating Lawyers: Preparation for the Profession of Law* (Jossey-Bass 2007). Sommerlad H, 'The "Social Magic" of Merit: Reproducing Privilege in the English Legal Profession' (2015) 22 IJLP 1

working across different types of institutions next to examine our experience of how this plays out.

3. Initial Reflections: Why are some students struggling to fulfil their career ambitions?

Our contrasting positionalities offer an opportunity to think about and start a conversation on how graduate outcomes metrics, as well as graduate attributes, shape what happens in our law degrees and the impact that has on what our students can and do go on to after graduation. Our reflections here are not based on systematic data collection over time – we wish we had known we would write this paper – we might have collected our experiences more systematically. Instead, this section is based on conversations we have had since we first considered writing this piece, which we have revisited throughout the process as we have engaged with the literature and the datasets available to us. What we have come to realise through this process is that this paper will not provide the answers we thought the data would show; it will not provide a neat solution or even significantly better understanding of the impact of graduate outcomes. Instead, going through this exercise has identified a series of key strands that need to be properly researched and brought together. The graduate outcomes landscape is more complex than we imagined at the start of this writing journey.

The practitioner-turned-academic in vocationally focused institutions

XXXX began her career as a legal practitioner and subsequently moved into legal education within institutions characterised by strong vocational missions. These environments, as we would expect from the literature and context outlined above, emphasised employability, professional readiness and alignment with regulatory expectations.[22] Graduate outcomes in such settings tended to focus on competencies associated with practice: client interaction, ethical awareness, commercial understanding and problem-solving in a narrowly focused legal context.[23] The curriculum was typically structured around clear pathways to qualification, and students were encouraged to imagine themselves as future practitioners from the outset. In this context, XXXX's approach to teaching and student support was shaped by her practitioner background. She approached teaching as an extension of practice,

[22] Sommerlad H, 'The "Social Magic" of Merit: Reproducing Privilege in the English Legal Profession' (2015) 22 IJLP 1.

[23] Francis A, 'Legal Education, Social Mobility and Employability: Possible Selves, Curriculum Intervention and the Role of Legal Work Experience' (2015) 42 JLS 44.

emphasising real-world application, professional judgement and the development of practical legal skills. Her identity as an educator was closely tied to her identity as a lawyer, and she found that students responded positively to this orientation asking about practice experience and bestowing a certain credibility due to the practitioner background. Many students at these institutions were the first in their family to go to university, came from areas of social deprivation and had no family or acquaintances in the legal profession. For many, the degree was inextricably linked with the profession and seen as a clear pathway to a good job. As such, many of the students valued the clarity, structure and vocational focus that such institutions offered.[24] However, many students also struggled to fulfil their ambition of securing training contracts with prestigious law firms with may taking paralegal roles in smaller local firms and a significant number not pursuing a career in law at all and instead taking up full time roles in sectors that had supported them through their studies such as retail.

However, upon moving into a more academically oriented institution, XXXX encountered a different set of expectations. Graduate attributes to be worked towards were framed more broadly, emphasising intellectual independence, critical engagement and research literacy. The institutional culture valued theoretical depth and scholarly inquiry, and XXXX found herself renegotiating her approach and how she positioned herself in the new context. She began to integrate more academic approaches into her teaching, exploring jurisprudential questions and socio-legal perspectives that had previously been peripheral to her practice-based orientation. It became clear that while some students valued the practitioner background and insights she could offer, there was a different expectation, one which focused on law as an academic discipline, and her credibility as a teacher came not from her practitioner background but from her subject knowledge and expertise. It also became clear that students at the research-intensive institution were more likely to be successful in their chosen career path because many already had networks and pathways mapped out and that many had family and friends in the legal professions. This was in stark contrast to the students taught at previous institutions and shaped career conversations and personal tutoring in a very different way.

The ‘academic academic’ in a career-led institution

OOOO has long positioned herself as an “academic academic” and began her academic career as a researcher. Her work as an educator has been grounded in research-led

[24] Cibyl, *Levelling the Playing Field in Law 2024* (Cibyl 2024)Levelling the Playing Field in Law 2024. Melissa Hardee (2012) Career expectations of students on Qualifying Law Degrees in England and Wales – A Legal Education and Training Survey; Advance HE

teaching, theoretical inquiry and disciplinary critique. Her early professional identity developed within institutions that prioritised interdisciplinary scholarship, intellectual independence and the cultivation of academic legal identities. In these settings, graduate outcomes were rarely talked about at all and were interpreted broadly, but with the knowledge that many students from those institutions went on to secure training contracts at elite firms and generally performed well in their chosen career paths, including academic postgraduate study and doctoral research. Legal Skills teaching which OOOO was involved in focused on the skills needed to study law, think about law and interpret the law and did not include any employability content and substantive law teaching, while including a focus on legal problem solving and application of the law through, for example, problem question was broad, socio-legal and required engagement with academic literature.

OOOO' move into the post-1992 sector and further into career-led and vocational institutions required a significant re-orientation of her thinking on how institutions position what happens post-graduation. Graduate attributes and outcomes were more tightly linked to employability generally and legal employment specifically, and the institutional narrative emphasised career readiness, skills development and alignment with professional expectations.[25] The skills agenda seemed to de-prioritise legal skills required for successful study and research of the law and instead focus on what was perceived to be required for legal practice. The extensive skills teaching, which included commercial awareness sessions, CV and application workshops, mock assessment centres, as well as embedded work-based learning, took up space which otherwise might have been used for the development of critical thinking, legal reading and research skills. Substantive modules also included significant reference to legal practice and application of the law rather than analysis of the law or the development of an awareness of law in context.

In spite of significant efforts to prepare students and provide them with the knowledge and skills to search for, apply for and secure relevant work experience, placements and ultimately employment, many students failed to do so within the legal profession even where they expressed an interest in doing so. Some of course were successful, and it is these success stories that are shared to show what is possible, but they hide the lived reality OOOO' witnessed across the institutions she worked at: Graduates from those institutions focused most on employability skills provision are actually less likely to secure prestigious jobs, whereas graduates from more academic, often elite, institutions are more likely to secure such roles.

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[25] Tomlinson M, *Graduate Employability in Context: Theory, Research and Debate* (Palgrave Macmillan 2017).

What can our combined experience tell us?

We have both witnessed the transformative power of legal education at all of the institutions we have taught. We have been part of the success stories; we have celebrated the elite training contracts, the roles in small high street firms and the change of mind which leads to a career pivot and change of direction. We have seen throughout our careers that law degrees can and do change lives and help people achieve their dreams. We have also seen clearly that different students value different things and thrive in different contexts. We do not think that there is one single correct model of legal education or that an academic focus is necessarily good and a vocational focus necessarily bad. Vocationally focused institutions and academically oriented institutions cultivate different things, and each is legitimate and valuable if properly understood by students and by the sector. The problem is therefore not really that for some, law degrees are inextricably linked to getting a job in the professions and that for some the two things have little to do with each other; the problem is that we are not honest about that and that this lack of honesty impacts more on those who do not have the knowledge of the sector or the professions to understand how it all works.[26] The problem is not that vocationally focused law schools exist, but that they do not provide better or even the same opportunities for entry into the legal professions or other prestigious roles than an academically focused institution does. Our lack of openness and transparency and institutions' (perhaps understandable) emphasis on the legal professional success stories in their marketing means that we create a false impression of a level playing field where one does not exist. We turn now to consider the extent to which our experience and the anecdotal evidence we can glean from that is reflected in the publicly available student data.

4. Student Data, Destinations and what it doesn't tell us

Metrics and data have become increasingly important in the HE sector, and it would be remiss of us not to acknowledge the data that exists in these areas. The intention here is not to provide a detailed statistical analysis but to try and locate our experience in the wider framework and use what we can see from the data to interrogate our experience for deeper reflection and vice versa. Law attracts diverse student cohorts.[27] Many institutions have significant proportions of widening participation students, mature learners, international students and those entering higher education through

[26] See for example Guth, J., & Dutton, K. (2018). SQE-ezed out: SRA, status and stasis. *The Law Teacher*, *52*(4), 425–438.

[27] See the various statistical reports available via the SRA, BSB and HESA data which shows in increase in diversity for law students but far less progress in the professions. See on this point: Lisa Webley et al, Access to a career in the legal Profession in England and Wales in Spencer Headworth et al (eds) *Diversity in Practice: race, Gender and Class in Legal and Professional Careers* (CUP 2016)

non-traditional routes.[28] These demographic differences shape how students engage with the curriculum and what it is they aspire to following graduation and what they know about how the system and the sector work. While there is no recent definitive data, anecdotal evidence from across the sector suggests that the vast majority of undergraduate law students do want to enter the legal professions – although some may seek other career paths from the outset and others will change their minds over time.[29] What is clear is that law is a popular discipline and that it continues to grow year on year, with over 175000 applications made to UCAS in 2025 and 32440 applicants receiving acceptances to study law as an undergraduate degree in the UK.[30] However, the data shows that acceptance rates at Russell Group[31] institutions are lower than those at post-1992 institutions, with the Russell Group mostly having acceptance rates below 20%, with some as low as 7.8 % and post-1992 consistently accepting a quarter of applicants with some having acceptance rates as high as 37%.[32]

The data also shows us that satisfaction with their degree is generally high amongst law students. The NSS suggests that the vast majority of students are satisfied with their experience of being taught law at university and that there is no difference in that satisfaction that appears to relate to the type of institution studied at.[33] None of this data really surprised us, and neither do league tables that consistently show research-intensive, often Russell Group, institutions at the top and vocationally focused, often post-1992s at the bottom. This narrative is well rehearsed in the HE sector, as are the flaws with this sort of ranking.[34] We were then expecting the Graduate Outcomes data to also be unsurprising. We expected to see significantly higher numbers of students from research-intensive institutions progressing into employment and highly skilled employment in particular, as well as into further PG study.

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[28] HESA, *Higher Education Student Statistics* (HESA 2024, 2026).

[29] See Hardee cited above note 24

[30] OfS Higher education market monitoring tool - Office for Students

[31] We use the Russel Group here as a proxy for research intensive and high ranking and post 1992 as a proxy for more vocationally focused and lower ranked but we are aware that this is far from a perfect proxy and that it risk reinforcing the narrative that we, at least in part, seek to challenge. We also did not look at all Russel Group institutions but chose The Universities of Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Newcastle, Nottingham, Sheffield and York. We then chose Post 1992s in the same cities: Birmingham City University, UWE, Leeds Beckett University, Liverpool John Moors University, Northumbria University, Nottingham Trent University, Sheffield Hallam University and York St John.

[32] OfS monitoring tool

[33] See NSS data and for example Full Law University Ranking 2026 | NSS Student Scores

[34] Grayson, J. Paul and Kyle Grayson. "Why the Rankings are Wrong: Lessons from Data Underlying U.K. University League Tables." *Canadian Journal of Higher Education / Revue canadienne d'enseignement supérieur*, volume 56, number 1, 2026, p. 35–54.For an interesting account of the emergence of rankings in the US context see Wilbers, S., Brankovic, J. The emergence of university rankings: a historical-sociological account. *High Educ* **86**, 733–750 (2023).

The first thing to note when looking at the most recent data available via HESA (23/24 cohort released in June 2026) is that Law graduates do relatively well in securing full-time employment and go into further study, either alongside work or full-time in significant numbers. 58% were employed full-time, 12 % were in employment and further study, and 7% were in full-time further study. The majority of those working (42%) are in professional, technical and scientific advice roles, with a further 20% being in public administration. Or, when sliced a different way, 76% are in highly skilled occupations such as managers, professional occupations or professional adjacent roles. Law overall therefore does relatively well in the Graduate Outcomes survey results for institutions. Highly skilled employment rates and further study remain high, although salary levels are lower when compared to other areas (for example, medicine, education or veterinary science) where employment rates are also high.

We looked at the GO Data for several Russell Group institutions and a post-1992 institution in the same city. There is no clear pattern as to whether one type of institution consistently achieves a higher response rate than another. Strikingly, across a number of cities, the non-Russell Group institution has a higher percentage of those responding to the survey in full-time employment. The most striking example is Northumbria University achieving 77% compared to Newcastle University's 55 %. Out of the 8 cities we looked at, the percentage of those who responded and said that they were in full-time work was higher in the Russell Group institution only in Liverpool and in Birmingham.[35] The data therefore does not obviously support what we thought we knew from our experiences working across different institutions. The data does not suggest that graduates from Russell Group institutions are more likely to secure highly skilled employment than those who attend post-1992 institutions.

The Office for Students data further highlights that those enrolled on UG Law degrees are slightly more likely to complete their degrees and that data (which is the 2022/23 graduating cohort rather than the most recent release) also shows slightly higher Progression into highly skilled employment or further study.[36] Overall though, we were expecting the data to show a more significant difference. Our experience suggests a different picture to the one presented by the data available through the HESA and OfS dashboard. Working with students in the different types of institutions suggests that students in research-intensive universities find it easier to secure work relating to their degree and to pursue their chosen career, whereas those in vocational or career-led institutions find it more difficult to access some of those opportunities. The data renders these experiences almost invisible because it does not show the full picture. It does not for example, show the recruitment efforts of large global firms and how they are focussed on large and highly ranked institutions, nor does it account for the additional

[35] Table 28 - Graduate activities by provider and subject area of degree | HESA
[36] OfS Higher education market monitoring tool - Office for Students

employability support and advice that many students rely on to help them make the connections that might eventually lead to employment; importantly, the data, as it is presented through the dashboards, makes no distinction between the types of legal professionals. For example, the graduate outcomes data does not tell us how many graduates go on to be solicitors in Magic Circle firms versus how many work as paralegals in smaller local firms. Even more importantly, the data does not tell us how the job a graduate is doing matches what they hoped they would be doing or whether they are in fact happy doing what they are doing. To gain some insights, we need to turn to other research.

In relation to the Bar, recent research by the Bar Council suggests that only 4 out of 10 of those who secured pupillage did so on the first attempt[37] and that there continue to be '*disparities in earnings and access to the most lucrative pupillage opportunities'. Pupils who attended Oxbridge are 15 times more likely to secure awards of £60,000 or more than those from other universities (61% compared to 4%)*.[38] Statistics for the solicitors profession show that the number of law graduates is much higher than the number of newly qualified solicitors (8304 in 2023)[39], so it is obvious that many of our graduates go on to do other things. What we do not have is data on the university-level educational background of solicitors. We do know that a high proportion of solicitors went to independent fee-paying schools (16% plus 4% who received bursaries covering most of the cost) and that this percentage increases to 19% (plus 4% receiving bursaries) when considering firms with 5 or more branches and to 21% (plus 3 % receiving bursaries) when looking at London only. It drops to 11% (plus 3% receiving bursaries) when considering regions such as the North East or the West Midlands. 58% of lawyers in SRA-regulated firms had parents from professional backgrounds, with only 17% coming from low socio-economic backgrounds, and the data remains the same for firms with 5 or more branches. There are regional variations, though with 13% coming from low socio-economic backgrounds in London firms compared to most regions reporting this metric in the low 20% bracket.[40]

Clearly, the data presented above does not give us a helpful picture in statistical terms. It is drawn from various data sources which measure slightly different things for different purposes and uses proxies which are not necessarily good matches for trying to

[37] Pupil survey report 2026
[38] 6 in 10 aspiring barristers fail to secure pupillage first time, research finds - Legal Cheek
[39] The Law Society Annual Statistics Report 2023 Annual statistics report 2023 | The Law Society
[40] See also Heather Rolfe and Tracey Anderson, "A Firm Choice: Law Firms' Preferences in the Recruitment of Trainee Solicitors" (2003) 10 International Journal of the Legal Profession 315; Louise Ashley and Laura Empson, "Differentiation and Discrimination: Understanding Social Class and Social Exclusion in Leading Law Firms" (2013) 66 Human Relations 219; Andrew C G Cook, James R Faulconbridge and David Muzio, "London's Legal Elite: Recruitment through Cultural Capital and the Reproduction of Social Exclusivity in City Professional Service Fields" (2012) 44 Environment and Planning A 1744

understand where our graduates head after graduation or who makes up the legal professions. However, looking at the data does suggest that some of what we experience is representative of the legal education sector and does warrant further thinking and questioning and that the GO data needs further systematic and detailed examination beyond the publicly available data. This prompted further conversations and reflections which we turn to now.

5. Reflections: Are we doing this wrong?

The data and our experience taken together prompted a series of reflections about what exactly it is we are trying to do, and what it is we should be doing. We realised that we too have been caught up in narrowly thinking about graduate outcomes as the thing that students do at the defined point after graduation and that this only tells us part of the story. While we were, in some ways, pleasantly surprised to see that the full-time employment figures in the GO data do not show big discrepancies between Russell Groups and Post 1992s, we also worry that that in itself reinforces the narrative of an even playing field, that the statistics reassure those who go to post 1992 vocationally focused institutions that they have the same opportunities as those who attend elite institutions when that might not actually be the case.

In thinking about these issues, we kept coming back to what we started calling the employability paradox. By that we mean that those institutions that focus most on career readiness and employability skills are often also those which struggle to help students achieve their career goals even if they achieve overall good graduate outcomes data. Whereas those institutions thought of as more 'academic' or elite spend less time on employability skills but have a higher success rate of students securing the most prestigious jobs.[41]

This employability paradox has, in our view many factors which need unpicking, but which speaks directly to some of the issues around graduate outcomes and a narrow definition of what good outcomes are alongside a set of metrics which reinforce that perception. It highlights that graduate outcomes are not actually about skills and competencies generally or about employability skills as defined by universities specifically but about less tangible elements of economic, social and human capital. To understand this fully, a number of elements need to be brought together: First, the curriculum needs careful evaluation. We make assumptions about the inclusion of employability and/or purely academic-focused materials and approaches based on our experiences at different institutions, but this might not hold true across the board. Understanding what is taught and how is important if we are to understand fully the

[41] HESA, *Graduate Outcomes Data Explorer* (HESA 2024, 2026).

impact graduate attributes and outcomes have on curricula across the sector. Second, the career support available and the form that takes, how it is embedded and how much it is used across institutions forms another part of the puzzle. Third, a more detailed, comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the labour market for law graduates. By this we mean that we need to fully understand where law graduates go and what they do after graduation and how this differs between institutions. We also need to understand where legal professionals in different roles and different types of firms undertook their studies to be able to be honest about the types of careers graduates typically have. Fourth, understanding what skills and attributes employers are seeking will help us understand differences in employment patterns (if indeed our anecdotal evidence holds true in a detailed examination of employability data) and whether they relate to what is taught and how it is taught. Finally, understanding what graduates do in the context of their lives and how they feel about what they do and the impact of their degree may be the most powerful indicator as to whether we are doing this wrong or right, and it might also be the best impetus for a shift in thinking about graduate outcomes.

As things stand, we can certainly argue that there is a strong case for different types of law schools that offer different approaches to study, to career progression and to skills development. Being able to choose from a variety of options appears to be a good thing. However, there is genuine choice for only very few students and choosing well means having clear parameters and knowledge of the different options, which most students who attend post-1992s often do not have because they do not benefit from family or friends with that sort of knowledge or the networks that can guide on these issues. They rely on the stories institutions tell; they see the success stories, the statistics and the availability of careers services and assume that entry into a law degree somehow levels the playing field. So, to answer the question in the title of this sub-section, yes, we are doing it wrong. But by that we don't mean that vocationally focused undergraduate degrees are wrong or that careers and employability support is not needed. What we are doing wrong is perpetuating the narrative that this makes a significant difference to equal access to professional roles, and what we are doing wrong is not challenging employment practices which privilege the type of institution over the knowledge and skills gained.

6. Conclusions: How do we do this right?

Do we need to abandon the idea of graduate outcomes to help us better support the diversity of what students do after university to lead fulfilling lives? Maybe, outcomes frameworks are often broad enough to accommodate multiple ways of doing things, but institutions may feel pressure to interpret them narrowly, particularly in marketised environments where employability metrics carry significant weight. We think to do this right, we need to go back to where we started this paper and explicitly acknowledge the

fact that graduate outcomes are not neutral markers or descriptors of skills or competencies. Instead, they represent complex indicators where a variety of factors play a part, including background, financial and social capital, geography, schools and university attended and sometimes just sheer luck. We need to better understand how these things play out and what the available data actually tells us about different institutions. Most importantly, though, we need to be honest about several issues that institutions currently do not make explicit: For many who apply to study law, there is no real choice about the type of institution they attend, and that is not because they are less able or less likely to be an excellent (legal) professional but because the university they attend is shaped by a myriad of factors that are often out of their control and because the information they have to make a choice is incomplete at best.[42] If choice is not a significant factor, then arguing that different types of institutions offer different things and therefore students can choose if they want a more vocational or a more academic student experience is flawed. This means that being honest about what roles students typically do and not just highlighting the exceptional and most prestigious positions alumni hold is ever more important. The final thing that requires honesty and a conversation is that all the career support in the world cannot makeup for a lack of social capital and professional identity formation. Those who have grown up in professional circles instinctively know how to dress, speak and behave in professional settings; they understand that world and their place in it, whereas those who have no experience of professional settings have to learn these things and have to work hard to fit in.[43]

Doing this right for us, we now realise, means doing a lot more work to understand the nuances, the differences we see in the data and in our experiences and what they really mean and thinking carefully about what different students need and, importantly, what different students bring. We need to unpick the employability paradox and work with employers to work towards more equal access and participation across a variety of professional settings and, more importantly, we need to start reclaiming graduate outcomes. We need to wrestle back the idea of graduate outcomes from the narrow metric-driven 'what are graduates doing 15 months after graduating and how much are they earning' to asking the questions that for us are more meaningful: What are graduates doing and how do they feel about that, what has the degree given them, are they happy – whatever happiness means for them. Graduate outcomes do not have to be measured in highly skilled employment or in salary levels. That is just what the neoliberal context has imposed on us. As we work to challenge and change that, the best thing we can do for all

[42] Weston, S., & McKeown, S. (2020). After the TEF and consumer law-based interventions – are prospective HE students now able to make informed choices? *The Law Teacher*, *54*(3), 414–425.
[43] Webley, Lisa, et al. "Access to a Career in the Legal Profession in England and Wales." *Diversity in Practice: Race, Gender, and Class in Legal and Professional Careers. Cambridge University* (2016): 198-225; Sommerlad H. Diversity and the legal profession: A UK perspective. *Law & Social Inquiry*. 2026;51(3):887-895; Tomlinson, J., Valizade, D., Muzio, D., Charlwood, A. and Aulakh, S. (2019), Privileges and penalties in the legal profession: an intersectional analysis of career progression. Br J Sociol, 70: 1043-1066.

our students is to be honest about what we know and don't know and be honest in the stories we tell and narratives we support. If we do that, we are doing it right!

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