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Vacation Scheme Handbook

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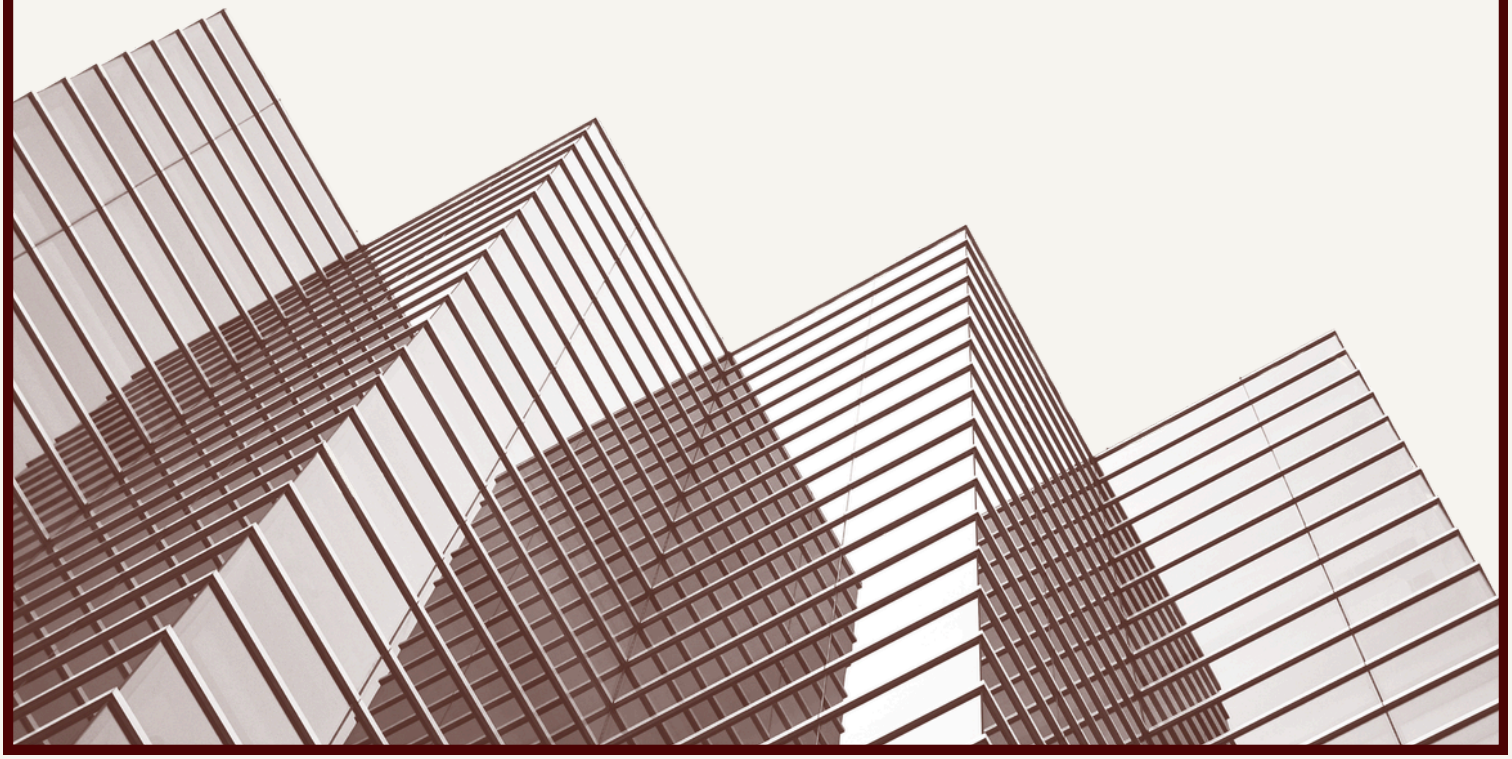

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1. Crafting your Firm Checklist

This section aims to help you distinguish between different firms. It can be daunting for applicants when it comes to understanding how different firms vary - they all look the same on paper. But like every company, each law firm has a distinct DNA which sets one apart from the next. The following categories can help you shortlist firms that fit your purview. It is advisable to pick three (3) to four (4) categories that matter most to you, as it is important to prioritise quality over quantity in applications.

A. Practice Area

All law firms structurally operate through distinct practice areas catered towards client needs. This can be broken down into two segments: non-contentious and contentious seats.

Non-contentious seats encompass those that service transactions carried out by clients with the intention of effecting change to their company without the contentious element. This includes but is not limited to:

- Mergers and Acquisitions;
- Financing;
- Restructuring and Insolvency;
- Private Funds;
- Private Equity (specialised focus);
- Competition/Antitrust;
- Employment;
- Tax.

On the flip side, contentious seats involve legal discourse in a court-regulated setting premised on the creative oration of legal principles and precedent. This predominantly includes:

- General Litigation and Arbitration;
- White-Collar Crime.

The practice areas are all interconnected, but each individual cog plays a large part in ensuring the machine works, meaning that specialists in different practice areas are consulted for their expert advice in ensuring that different components of the transaction interact cohesively. This means that each practice area is ultimately distinct in their respect.

It is crucial to preface that independent research must be conducted to understand the scope applicable to each practice area before using it as a factor in shortlisting law firms. This is because if you are to use the practice area factor as a base, it has to be because it is one that you plan or have an interest towards specialising in upon qualification as a solicitor. Research must be done alongside deep reflection on your personal interests, and how they fit into the nature of each practice area. It is particularly easy for recruiters to distinguish between the good and bad apples - applications that do not express genuine interest in a practice area seldom succeed in reaching the next round of the recruitment process.

Durham Law Society publishes its flagship newsletter LexMarkets every term, in which one half focuses on analysing specialised topics within 6 different practice areas (i.e. Corporate, Banking & Finance, Litigation & Arbitration, Restructuring & Insolvency, and Competition/Antitrust). Our Articles offer insights into how the legal structures/instruments in each practice area evolve in response to market shifts. It is advisable that readers kick off firm research by reading these Articles, as they are key to understanding and developing commercial awareness.

The strategy of law firms with respect to practice areas always adapts according to client needs and structural shifts in the market.

However, the following sources outline the concurrent strengths of law firms across different practice areas: Legal500, Chambers and Partners, Chambers Student, Legal Cheek and others.

2. Industry

Some firms opt to focus on industries. This includes, but is not limited to, Life Sciences, TMT, or Retail and Consumer. The industry approach is a less conventional form of legal service. Historically, law firms structured deals through a holistic, practice-area-oriented manner, as there was no need for an industry-focused approach due to the reliance of law firms on legacy and baggage practices, where they choose to abide by the 'don't reinvent the wheel' stance.

However, many firms have implemented an industry-focused approach into their practice offerings. This is due to a plethora of reasons, but the most important among them is the need to cater towards increasingly niche and specialised markets. This can be attributed to the fact that in a crowded legal market, focusing on a specific industry helps firms stand out and attract clients by offering a deeper understanding, compared to generalist firms, of their clients' specific business challenges and the esoteric issues within their respective industries. The capability to produce tailored legal solutions also creates a more effective and efficient legal service.

Utilising the sector approach to craft your law firm checklist can be effective if you are truly interested in a particular sector. For non-law students, this means understanding how your unique degree fits within a particular sector. Several firms with industry approaches often align their training and client secondments around these industries - for instance, Covington is extremely well-known for its life science focus, as well as CMS being a preeminent force behind energy and renewables focus.

3. Office Network

Swiss verein structure vs Regional offices in the UK.

A firm's office network determines how its lawyers collaborate across locations and deliver services to clients operating in multiple jurisdictions.

Understanding these networks is particularly important for applicants interested in global transactions, international arbitration, or regulatory work, where cross-border coordination is central to the practice.

The S*wiss verein* structure allows independent firms in different jurisdictions to operate under a single global brand. Each member firm remains a separate legal and financial entity, responsible for its own profits, liabilities, and regulatory compliance. Firms such as Baker McKenzie, Dentons, Norton Rose Fulbright, and Squire Patton Boggs use this model. This structure lets firms expand internationally without merging finances or assuming collective liability, enabling rapid global growth. It also helps manage conflicts of interest and maintain local control over management. However, integration between offices can be less seamless than within a single-partnership model, which may affect collaboration and consistency across jurisdictions.

Firms with regional office networks operate within a single legal entity, where all offices share profits, management, and client relationships. This structure ensures consistent service while maintaining a strong presence in local markets. It is used by firms such as Pinsent Masons, Addleshaw Goddard, and Shoosmiths. For trainees, regional networks often provide a balance between exposure to national clients and the close-knit working environment of smaller offices. They also allow lawyers to develop expertise across different regional economies while remaining part of a unified firm structure.

4. Secondment Opportunities

Client secondment vs International secondment

n corporate law, secondment is the temporary transfer of an employee from their original employer to a different organisation or a different internal environment for a specified time period. The secondee continues to be employed by the original employer and is expected to return to their original role afterwards, subject to certain exemptions (e.g. the secondee is allowed to remain with the overseas office of their employer).

There are two types of secondment - international and client. The former involves the secondee (employee) transferring to another office of its current employer situated in a foreign jurisdiction (e.g. Brussels office). Generally, such secondment is either initiated by a shortage of staff in the receiving office's capacity, or it is a condition of the secondee's training contract (White & Case gives its training contract holders optional secondment to one of its international offices for a 6-month period). The chances of international secondment largely depend on the firm's scale of the global footprint and client base, as both these factors determine the volume of multi-jurisdictional work the firm receives. One benefit of international secondment is that secondees better understand how cross-jurisdictional transactions are executed through viewing

Such an arrangement is used to provide temporary staff coverage, which strengthens client/cross-office relationships, along with offering employee career development by gaining new skills and perspectives.

5. Firm Structure and Training Style

Seat system vs non-rotational training contracts

The seat system remains the most common structure across City and international law firms. Under this model, trainees rotate through several practice areas, known as seats, over the course of their two-year training contract. In most cases, trainees spend six months in four seats; however, some firms adopt a shorter rotation model, offering six four-month seats (for example, Dechert, Watson Farley & Williams, and Sidley Austin). Certain firms may require trainees to complete both a transactional and a contentious seat, while others include secondments as one of the seat options. This system gives trainees structured exposure to a variety of practice areas, enabling them to make a more informed decision about which department to qualify into.

By contrast, under a non-rotational training contract, trainees do not move between fixed departments. Instead, they work across multiple practice areas simultaneously, taking on matters according to business need and personal interest. The non-rotational system offers greater flexibility and earlier responsibility. It allows trainees to explore more than four practice areas or, alternatively, to focus more deeply on a single area for an extended period. Because there are no formal rotations, trainees are expected to manage their own workload and relationships across different teams, which demands a high level of initiative and organisation. This model has been adopted by only a small number of firms, including Jones Day, Curtis, and Crowell & Moring. Other firms, such as Vinson & Elkins, retain a seat system but introduce more cross-departmental flexibility in the later stages of the training contract. Smaller and boutique firms may also be more likely to employ a non-rotational or hybrid structure.

Size of trainee intake.

Large City firms, including those in the Magic and Silver Circle, typically recruit larger trainee cohorts. These firms often provide extensive formal training programmes, structured induction processes, and

broad peer support networks, both nationally and internationally. As there are more people, larger cohorts also tend to offer more opportunities for internal networking and involvement in firm-wide initiatives. Trainees benefit from learning alongside a sizeable group of peers, sharing experiences, and developing collaborative skills. However, competition for popular seats or secondments can be greater, and contact with partners and senior associates may be more limited.

Smaller intakes, common among US and boutique firms, often mean that trainees work as the sole trainee within a practice area. This environment usually brings greater individual responsibility from an early stage, as trainees work in smaller deal teams, gaining closer exposure to partners and taking on substantive tasks earlier in their training contract. The environment can be more closely-knit, with supervisors providing tailored guidance and feedback. However, training is often less structured and more focused on learning on-the-job.

Neither model is inherently better, and each offers distinct advantages. A large intake may suit those who value collaboration, structure, and a wide peer network, while a smaller intake may appeal to individuals who thrive in hands-on, high-responsibility settings. Applicants should consider which environment best aligns with their working style and professional development goals.

6. Culture

Culture covers includes a plethora of different factors, including but not limited to:

- Collegial relationships (i.e. collegial vs competitive);
- Expectations around hours and availability;
- Social/peer environment;

- Attitudes towards hybrid working;
- Approach towards inclusion and progression.

Arguably, the culture of a law firm is the hardest to ascertain from brochures. The most optimal way for one to gauge culture is through combining three evidence streams: (1) Formal sources of internet research, (2) Employee reviews and rankings, and (3) Primary research (open days, coffee chats, assessment day impressions). It is crucial to make notes on whether the culture you see is one where you'd thrive when working under stressful circumstances. Ask yourself these questions: Can I see myself working in this law firm for 12 hours a day, 5-6 days a week? Do I see myself becoming woven into the firm's fabric? Are the law firm's employees people that I can see myself working with in the future?

7. Pro bono focus

Pro bono publico, meaning "for the public good", refers to legal work undertaken voluntarily and without charge, typically for individuals, charities, or organisations that cannot afford legal advice. Pro bono work has become an increasingly integral part of life at commercial law firms, reflecting both professional ethics and broader ESG commitments. It also enhances a firm's reputation and can help attract clients and lawyers who value social responsibility. Many international firms now treat pro bono as a core element of their global strategy rather than a peripheral initiative.

For trainees, pro bono offers early opportunities to manage their own matters, work directly with clients, and develop key skills such as drafting, interviewing, and advocacy. It enables them to contribute meaningfully to causes they care about while building confidence and professional judgement.

While almost all firms offer pro bono opportunities, they vary considerably in the scale and structure of their programmes. Some firms maintain large, coordinated initiatives with dedicated resources and international reach, while others employ full-time pro bono lawyers and operate specialist in-house teams. Certain firms also count pro bono hours towards billable targets, reflecting a broader institutional recognition of its importance.

Applicants should research each firm's approach to pro bono (the types of projects undertaken, partner organisations involved) and may consider using pro bono to highlight how the firm's values align with their own.

We also recommend curating your applications in a structured spreadsheet or workspace, whether through Google Docs, Excel, or Notion. Tracking firms, deadlines, contacts, open days/events and application stages in one place helps you stay organised, spot patterns in your applications, and avoid last-minute errors. In a process where volume and timing matter, organisation is a competitive advantage.

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2. Non-Law Route

A non-law background is by no means a disadvantage in securing a training contract.

Interviews are unlikely to test candidates on legal concepts beyond what you bring up (i.e. if you mention warranties, then you might be asked about what you know about them, but you probably would not be otherwise). Prior legal knowledge beyond what you will naturally read about in the course of researching practices and writing applications is certainly not required.

In terms of motivation, non-law applicants should focus on having clear answers to the following questions:

- Why you chose to study your subject at undergraduate (and why you didn't study law)
- Why you are pursuing a career in law given your academic background (I was asked "you study X and you want to be a lawyer; talk me through how you got here," or very similar questions, in three interviews).
- Why you want to be a commercial solicitor specifically. Given you do not have an academic background in law, interviewers will just want to see evidence that you have both a proper understanding and genuine motivations. Naturally, experiences of any kind will speak volumes here.

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3. Getting Your Foot in the Door

There is a strong argument that you are far more likely to progress in a vacation scheme or training contract application if you have engaged with the firm in a tangible way beforehand. While it is not impossible to succeed without doing so, statistics and experience suggest that prior interaction significantly improves your chances.

'Getting your foot in the door' means building familiarity and visibility with the firm, whether through attending **open days, careers dinners, spring weeks**, or **virtual work experience**. These experiences not only strengthen your CV but also demonstrate genuine interest and initiative, both of which recruiters value highly.

If you have not engaged directly yet, don't fret. There are effective alternatives. Reaching out to trainees or associates for a short call or coffee chat can be just as impactful. LinkedIn is the best platform for this; try filtering by Durham alumni or shared experiences such as previous workplaces or societies. Finding common ground helps build rapport and makes your outreach feel natural and authentic.

Exemplar

Hi ___,

I hope you're well. I'm a prospective second-year law student applying for the ___ Insight Day. We actually met at the ___ dinner in 2024, and I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions, or perhaps borrow you for a quick call, to gain some insight into the firm and strengthen my application. I understand you're incredibly busy, so I'd really appreciate any time or advice you're able to offer.

Best wishes,

___

This is a good example of how to reach out professionally and build meaningful connections with firm representatives. While not a guaranteed formula for success, engaging this way can provide valuable insights and, where appropriate, mentioning such conversations in your application can subtly demonstrate initiative and genuine interest. That said, responses are not always guaranteed; trainees and lawyers often have demanding workloads. Likewise, ‘name-dropping’ should be used carefully and only when it adds genuine value. Ultimately, this approach reflects proactive engagement — a quality that consistently sets strong applicants apart.

4. Research

1. How to do research

Whilst this handbook has asserted one should “get your foot in the door”. The natural follow-up question is how. Research is the foundation. It is not optional, and it is where many applicants underperform, not because they do nothing, but because they research superficially.

At a minimum, you must understand what the firm actually does, how it makes revenue and profit, how it trains its lawyers, and where it sits in the market relative to competitors. Strong research allows you to personalise applications, perform better in interviews, and ask informed questions. Weak research results in generic answers that are immediately identifiable.

The Firm’s Website

The firm’s website should always be your starting point. Many firms have dedicated graduate recruitment portals, brochures, and training contract pages. These materials are carefully curated and signal exactly what the firm values. You should read the graduate brochure in full, paying close attention to the firm’s core practice areas, client base, training structure, and stated competencies. Some firms are highly specific about what they look for in candidates, and this information is particularly valuable when answering competency and motivation questions.

Annual Reports and Financials

While not essential for early written applications, reviewing a firm’s annual report becomes increasingly valuable for interviews. These

documents provide insight into revenue growth, profitability, office performance (especially in London), and strategic priorities. Looking at partner promotions, lateral hires, and office expansions can help you understand where the firm is investing and how it differentiates itself from competitors. Being able to compare firms at this level demonstrates genuine commercial awareness.

Chambers & Partners and Legal 500

Chambers and Partners and Legal 500 are trusted, independent sources for assessing law firms and practice areas. They rank firms and lawyers based on extensive research, including interviews with clients and practitioners. Use these platforms to identify the firm's strongest practice areas and sector specialisms. While rankings are not everything and can reflect market dynamics or structural biases, they are extremely useful for grounding your answers in objective analysis. Referencing a firm's recognised strengths in a specific practice area can strengthen motivation answers and signal informed interest.

Law Firm Press Coverage & Trade Press

Beyond rankings, we recommend reading what the legal press says about the firm. Outlets such as Legal Business, Law.com International, The Lawyer, and Financial Times legal coverage regularly report on lateral hires, office strategy, partner departures, and market positioning. This helps you understand how the firm is perceived externally and how it is evolving.

Firm Events & First-Hand Exposure

Firm-run events, from open days, insight schemes, law fairs, dinners, law society led events and panel events, are research tools in their own right. They provide insight into how the firm presents itself, the personalities of its lawyers, and what it chooses to emphasise. Reflecting on these experiences in applications is often more persuasive than second-hand research.

Podcasts and Webinars

Many firms now produce podcasts, webinars, and panel discussions focusing on particular practice areas, market trends, or client challenges. These resources offer insight into how firms think, speak, and position themselves commercially. Listening to this content can deepen your understanding of the firm's priorities and provide language and perspectives that elevate your answers.

Social Media

Social media has become an increasingly important outreach tool for some firms. Platforms such as LinkedIn, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are often used to showcase firm culture, trainee experiences, and key initiatives. Used carefully, social media can provide useful insight and occasional soundbites that add colour to an application. However, it should supplement, not replace, more substantive research.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is one of the most powerful research tools available if used properly. Most lawyers and prospective trainees maintain a presence on the platform. Reaching out to trainees, newly qualified associates, or junior associates can provide insight that is not available online. These individuals have recently gone through the process you are navigating and can offer practical perspectives on training, culture, and day-to-day work. Responses are never guaranteed (lawyers are busy) but thoughtful, respectful outreach can be extremely valuable. Be personable, concise, and courteous. The aim is to build rapport, not to force an application conversation.

External Platforms (TCLA/CLA)

There are also external resources that provide consolidated insights into firms and practice areas. While no paid resource is essential and many students succeed without them, some platforms offer well-structured firm profiles, practice area breakdowns, and application guidance that can complement your research when used selectively.

Proper research takes time. As a rough guide, you should expect to spend at least two to three focused hours (minimum) per firm if you want to apply credibly. Anything less is unlikely to produce the depth of understanding required to stand out in a competitive application process.

2. Intro to Commercial Awareness - by Jake Schogger

To explain the meaning and importance of commercial awareness for aspiring lawyers, Jake Schogger offers his insights into this area. He is the founder of Commercial Law Academy, a former Freshfields solicitor, a best-selling author and a leading career coach.

What is “commercial awareness”?

If a person is “commercially aware”, they have at least a foundational understanding of how businesses operate, alongside a general awareness of the broader economic, political and commercial factors that can affect businesses and the industries in which they operate.

This could include an understanding of the types of strategies that businesses pursue (for example, an understanding of why and how businesses raise finance or engage in M&A activity), and the risks and threats that businesses face. It can also include knowledge of current affairs, industry trends, political events and the economy, as well as a foundational understanding of how these factors can affect firms and their clients.

Why is commercial awareness important for applicants?

Commercial awareness provides essential context that enables you to better understand and effectively tackle commercial case studies and business-related assessment centre questions. It can also help to prepare you for vacation schemes and, ultimately, a training contract.

For example, commercial awareness can help you to participate in informed discussions with supervisors, understand the context of the matters you work on, and prepare for presentations, research reports and written exercises. More generally, demonstrating that you are "commercially aware" can help to evidence your interest in, understanding of, and enthusiasm for the firm's clients and work.

How does commercial awareness come up in interviews?

Firms increasingly look for commercial "interest" as much as (if not more than) commercial "awareness". You will not be expected to recall every single commercial, political and economic event that has happened over recent years. However, you may be expected to demonstrate an interest in and basic understanding of how businesses operate, plus the broader commercial factors that can affect the firm and its clients.

With this in mind, commercial awareness may be tested in various ways during interviews, for example:

- You may be asked to define "commercial awareness" and explain its relevance to the firm's practice area groups, clients and deals.
- You may be asked to discuss a particular news story that has interested you or be asked point-blank about a specific event that has recently occurred.
- You may be presented with a legal or commercial case study, or fictitious client/business scenario, requiring you to demonstrate your understanding of various business, financial and (depending on the context) legal concepts.

How to build commercial awareness?

Attempting to "cram" commercial awareness right before an interview is rarely effective, as it tends to produce a superficial understanding of the commercial topics that you read about. If your understanding is shallow, it becomes harder to demonstrate your interest or speak confidently about these issues during interviews.

Consider understanding commercial awareness as reading the first few pages of a dense novel. It is often difficult to maintain your interest at the start because you lack an understanding of the context or the history of the characters. It is the history and the developments that draw you in, meaning stories tend to become far more compelling once you start to understand how the sections you are reading fit into the broader context of the book. Likewise, the commercial landscape is easier to grasp after understanding the gist of commercial awareness.

News stories and commercial concepts are not generally engaging in isolation, but once you start to understand how the pieces fit together, and the impact this can all have on firms, clients and industries, you are likely to find them far more interesting and become more confident talking about them in interviews.

It is better to get into the habit of building your commercial awareness on a regular basis, and even 5 minutes per day can make all the difference. You may be surprised at how much more interested you become in business news and commercial concepts once you have started to see the bigger picture.

Key definitions and company research

Make the habit of looking up definitions for any terms you don't understand (Commercial Law Academy's Definitions Glossary and M&A course provide clear explanations of key business terms, commercial concepts and City jargon), as well as researching companies mentioned in the news that you do not recognise.

Use whatever methods best to help you retain the information you pick up. Discuss news stories with others, write notes in your own words, or record yourself presenting on topics.

Business news

There are many resources available to help build your awareness, knowledge and understanding of current affairs. Signing up for news digests can help get you in the habit of regularly consuming the news in concise and manageable segments. Watson's Daily, The Financial Times and The Economist all offer digests that provide solid insights into topical issues affecting the business, finance and political spheres. Each offers regular digests/newsletters.

I strongly recommend subscribing to The Economist's free weekly digest email, which succinctly summarises 8 – 12 of the most important political, economic and commercial news stories from the previous week.

If you're interested in technology, industry trends and the investment landscape, I also recommend the free weekly digests available from CB Insights and AngelList,. There are also numerous other digests covering the full spectrum of business-related news.

Commercial Law Academy Resources

Complete Commercial Law Academy's range of specialist commercial awareness courses (including 16 example case studies, a legal tech masterclass, M&A and private equity deep dives, an insight into current affairs and how to discuss them, and an insight into the business of law firms) to gain a better understanding of the meaning of commercial awareness, how it comes up in interviews, how to develop it, and how to structure your answers to commercial awareness questions.

The platform offers on-demand access to 26 expert-led courses designed to help young professionals ace law applications, interviews

and internships. Learn about law firms and the role of lawyers, build and apply commercial awareness, and successfully navigate professional environments.

3. Developing Commercial Awareness

Commercial awareness cannot be absorbed passively, it must be built through active engagement and curiosity. Writing about current events, whether through short reflections, LinkedIn posts, or personal summaries, forces you to think critically, research thoroughly, and articulate complex ideas clearly. This process demands genuine understanding and is by far the most efficient way to build lasting fluency and confidence.

Consistency matters more than volume, it's about forming daily habits that keep you commercially fluent. Begin by listening to the Financial Times News Briefing each morning and reading the front page of the FT. Follow stories that genuinely interest you and review the Companies section once or twice a week. Stay informed on wider political and economic developments through BBC News, Sky News, or Reuters, as these provide essential context for the environment in which law firms and their clients operate.

Legal and commercial newsletters are another excellent resource. Reading one daily, such as *Non-Billable, LittleLaw, ZipLaw, Watson's Daily, or Exec Sum*, offers digestible insights into the intersection between law, business, and world affairs. As your confidence grows, broaden your scope: The Economist provides accessible, in-depth analysis, while sector-specific publications can deepen understanding of particular markets or practice areas. You don't need to read everything, focus on topics that genuinely engage you.

Firms' own press releases and blogs are also invaluable. They highlight major deals, client work, and regulatory developments, offering both commercial and legal perspectives.

Exploring these resources will help you understand how firms position themselves strategically and the types of matters that define their practice.

Fundamentally, commercial awareness is about translating understanding into insight, being able to discuss how legal, political, and global developments shape client strategy and a firm's ability to deliver value. Successful candidates can clearly explain how a firm differentiates itself from competitors, how world events affect its clients, and how they, as future lawyers, can contribute to that success.

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5. Situational Judgement Tests

There is never a one-size-fits-all approach to tackling a situational judgment test. However, the following is a brief guide to keep in mind when completing one.

Align Every Answer With the Firm:

Before attempting any SJT, keep the firm's values, behaviours, and expected trainee qualities clearly in front of you. Your ranking of options should consistently reflect what the firm rewards.

Example: Latham & Watkins highlights an "entrepreneurial spirit" → prioritise options involving independent thinking, proactive problem-solving, taking ownership, and resourcefulness.

Avoid options that signal dependency, passivity, or waiting for direction - rank these last.

Identifying the Best vs. Worst Options

Most candidates can identify the "best" behaviour easily. The challenge lies in identifying the worst response when several options look unappealing. Keep these NEVER-DO behaviours firmly at the bottom of your ranking (non-exhaustive list):

Never:

- Avoid taking responsibility or ownership (US firms especially value hands-on training and autonomy in lean teams.)
- Miss deadlines, leave work incomplete, or submit substandard work
- Refuse feedback
- Give legal advice as a trainee
- Decline opportunities to learn something new

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State Your Assumptions Clearly (For Interview SJTs)

Some scenarios may admit multiple reasonable actions depending on context.
Always preface your reasoning with assumptions:

- “Assuming my existing work isn’t due today, I’d prioritise the new urgent task and finish the original task tomorrow.”
- “However, if both tasks are due today, I would immediately contact the relevant supervisor to clarify prioritisation.”

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6. Application Questions

The written application or cover letter is usually the first stage of the recruitment process and the first impression you make on graduate recruitment. It must therefore be close to perfect.

At the most basic level, spelling, punctuation, grammar, (SPAG) and formatting should be flawless, these reflect your attention to detail, a key quality every recruiter looks for in future lawyers. Beyond technical accuracy, your writing should be clear, structured, and purposeful, demonstrating professionalism and a genuine interest in the firm. Each sentence should serve a function: to inform, persuade, or distinguish you from other applicants.

Written Application

Whilst law firms differ in their application questions, most will include or incorporate elements of the following:

“Why commercial law”

This question is of utmost importance. Even if it doesn’t appear in the written application, it will almost certainly arise during an interview. It’s your opportunity to tell your story, your journey into the legal profession and, by extension, into commercial law.

Your answer should be chronological and personal, showing how your interest in law first developed before narrowing towards commercial practice. For most applicants, especially those from non-law backgrounds, a direct passion for commercial law rarely emerges from the outset, it evolves through experience and exposure.

Explain why law over other career paths. What thought processes

guided your decision? What alternatives did you consider, and what specifically led you to realise that law — and particularly commercial law, aligns with your skills and ambitions?

Avoid generic statements. Phrases like "I want a fast-paced, client-facing career" are meaningless and could apply to countless professions. Instead, ground your answer in specific experiences, modules you've studied, firm events you've attended, or experiences in other sectors that clarified your motivations.

Strong responses combine authenticity, reflection, and evidence. They demonstrate that you understand what a career in commercial law entails — intellectually challenging work, long-term client relationships, and the intersection of business, law, and strategy.

Exemplar
"My interest in commercial law stems from an innate drive for advocacy and problem-solving. Early success in my very first mock trial concerning a commercial dispute between an oil company and Germany strengthened my fascination with resolving complex cross-border disputes. This experience revealed the intricate relationship between law, politics, and business, and how each influences the other in shaping commercial outcomes. It was attending A&O Shearman's Legal Foundations Course which further expanded my understanding of corporate law, particularly M&A and Capital Markets, where I was drawn to the challenge of facilitating strategic growth while balancing legal, financial, and regulatory considerations. (thought process)"

"Why are you applying to [X] firm"

This is one of the most heavily weighted questions in any written application and your primary opportunity to demonstrate genuine motivation.

Strong answers go beyond surface-level research and show a clear understanding of the firm's core practices, training philosophy, and position in the market.

Many applicants fall short by failing to research firms in sufficient depth or by producing generic responses. Every firm has a distinct structure and unique selling point (USP) whether that's structured Magic Circle training, leaner US teams with early responsibility, or alternative training models at firms such as Freshfields or Dechert, and recruiters expect this to be understood.

Equally important is personalisation. This is not about inventing relevance, but selecting experiences that genuinely align with the firm. Remember, you are applying as a prospective trainee, so your focus should be on the training contract itself and what the firm offers over the next two years, rather than abstract long-term aspirations

A Recommended Structure

1. Firm's Work
   - Identify the firm's core practice areas and commercial strengths. If discussing a recent deal, ensure it is one you genuinely understand by researching beyond headlines and the firm's website. Consider whether the firm is full-service or has a particular niche. (Note: It is important you recognise that transactional work, especially M&A and private equity, often underpins firm revenue so acknowledging that in your answer is also key)

2. Training and the Nature of the Training Contract
   - This is where many applicants miss an opportunity. If applying to a UK or Magic Circle firm, explain what appeals to you about larger teams, structured supervision, and formal training, and how this suits your learning style. If applying to a US firm, address leaner deal teams, greater responsibility from an early stage, and exposure to complex work.

- Consider secondment opportunities, whether international or in-house, as well as training in areas such as technology, AI, or business development. Firms invest heavily in training to maintain their competitive edge, you ought to show that you understand and value this.

3. Wider Firm Culture and Opportunities

- You may also address elements such as pro bono work, affinity networks, or broader firm culture, but only where this is relevant and well-researched. (*Be particularly careful with DEI references, especially in light of recent shifts in US firms' policies accuracy matters). First-hand experiences, such as attending an open day, dinner, or networking event, are especially persuasive, as they demonstrate informed motivation rather than assumption.
- Candidates at this stage may also 'name-drop', you should approach this with caution. Some firms do verify references, and even where they don't, unsupported claims add little value. If you choose to name-drop, ensure it is meaningful and accurate. As a rule of thumb, reference an associate or counsel, trainees lack sufficient seniority, while partners are often too closely linked to graduate recruitment.

If your answer could be copied, pasted, and submitted to another firm by changing only the firm's name, it is not sufficiently tailored. A strong response should make it obvious why this firm, and not another, is the right environment for you to train and develop.

Exemplar:

"I am enthusiastic in pursuing a career at [redacted], driven by the firm's pioneering role in high-profile transactions within the artificial intelligence industry. [redacted]'s distinction as the leading firm for managing the most AI M&A deals in 2023, coupled by its renowned reputation for corporate transactions, such as [firm recent deal], underscores the firm's dedication to navigating intricate and forward-thinking deals.

[Redacted]'s thought leadership in artificial intelligence particularly resonated with me, especially insights shared by Partner [redacted] on the UK's evolving AI landscape. Having attended the London AI Conference, I was struck by how closely the firm's analysis aligned with wider industry discussions, reinforcing its forward-looking approach to advising clients at the intersection of technology, regulation, and commercial strategy. Joining [redacted] means being at the forefront of pivotal transactions shaping our society, aligning with my aspiration to emerge as a distinguished professional in the industry, driving meaningful change in this dynamic field.

With the firm's modest trainee intake, I am particularly drawn to its emphasis on smaller teams and early responsibility, and to a training environment that prioritises learning by doing. This approach aligns with my preference for independent, ownership-driven work, a preference I developed through preparing for the university's internal moot competition, where responsibility for research and strategy rested individually rather than collectively, as in my earlier mock trial experience with the Bar Society. I am motivated by environments that demand initiative and accountability, and I believe this structure best supports meaningful professional development, sustained growth, and the development of sound commercial judgement.

Beyond its legal prowess, I am drawn to [redacted] for its diversity and inclusivity culture and the firm persistently creating a 'rich tapestry of ideas that challenge the status quo'. As an individual from a minority ethnic background, I value the firm's dedication to its [redacted] Network, driving more venture capital into high-growth companies led by [redacted] entrepreneurs. Moreover, the firm's commitment to pro-bono work resonates with my experience volunteering and teaching English in Bali, where I gained valuable skills in research, cultural sensitivity, and lateral problem-solving."

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“Please give details of your extra-curricular activities, and any prizes, scholarships, positions of responsibility, or noteworthy achievements that will support your application.”

Good example:

My dedication extends to competitive swimming, where I proudly participated in the British Swimming Championship 2022, competing in the men's 100-meter backstroke. This accomplishment reflects my commitment, consistency, and ability to manage fatigue during intense training. Swimming not only serves as a means of fitness and stress alleviation but also instils a sense of perfectionism, particularly in perfecting stroking techniques, contributing to developing my critical-thinking skills.

Bad Example

At university I joined the Caledonian Society where I have taken part in country dancing, particularly reeling. This has been a very enjoyable activity and I have gone to a number of events. Through this I have learned about teamwork and communication, since reeling involves dancing with a partner and in groups. I have also improved my time management by balancing rehearsals with my studies. Country dancing has shown me discipline and commitment, as it requires learning the patterns properly. Overall, this has been a positive experience that has helped me gain transferable skills which I believe will be useful in the future.

Why is it bad?

- Generic participation: Just says they attended events — no sense of distinction or responsibility.
- Vague skills: Mentions teamwork, time management, discipline — but without real evidence or depth.
- Surface reflection: “I did X so I learned Y” — doesn’t show how skills were tested or developed.
- Commonplace: Could be written by almost any society member; doesn’t stand out.

- Lacks impact: No measurable achievements, leadership, or competitive element.

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7. Cover Letter

Your cover letter is your first chance to present a coherent and persuasive narrative, one that ties together who you are, why you are pursuing commercial law, and why a particular firm aligns with your ambitions. It should complement, not repeat, your application answers, and follow a clear, logical structure built around three pillars:

1. Why Commercial Law

Outline your journey into the legal profession and how your interest in commercial law developed. This section should reveal intellectual curiosity and a grounded understanding of what the work involves — advising clients, structuring deals, and resolving disputes in fast-moving commercial environments. Avoid abstract statements like "I enjoy problem-solving" or "I want a client-facing career." Instead, refer to tangible experiences such as modules, case competitions, or firm events that illustrate your growing awareness of the commercial world and its legal dimensions.

2. Why the Firm

Demonstrate genuine insight. Firms look for evidence that you have researched their culture, work, and market focus. Avoid listing practice areas or rankings — instead, identify aspects that resonate with you personally. This might include notable transactions, the firm's approach to innovation, or its international strategy. A strong answer connects what the firm values with what motivates you, showing alignment between your career goals and their work.

3. Why You

Conclude by linking your skills and experiences to what the firm

looks for in its trainees. Emphasise transferable skills such as analytical precision, communication, and resilience — but substantiate these with examples. Show, don't tell. Instead of claiming to be a good team player, demonstrate it through experiences where collaboration, initiative, or adaptability produced results.

A strong cover letter reads as a story, not a checklist. Each paragraph should flow naturally into the next, forming a persuasive argument for why you are both capable and motivated. Your tone should be professional yet authentic — confident, structured, and tailored to each firm. Above all, precision matters: every word should earn its place.

It is also advisable to use clear connecting sentences to transition smoothly between why commercial law → why the firm → and why you. These links help your cover letter read as a cohesive narrative rather than a series of separate answers. For example, after discussing firm values/culture, you might naturally bridge into your own profile:

"...I value environments that celebrate authenticity, and [redacted] commitment to inclusion and growth makes it a place where I can thrive personally and professionally."

In your next paragraph you can then transition seamlessly into your suitability for the firm:

"Building on this alignment of values, I believe my skills and experiences position me to thrive at [redacted]."

It is also important to know who you are addressing. If you are writing to a named individual, you should close with Yours sincerely; if the recipient is unnamed, use Yours faithfully. Always read the application instructions carefully, some firms require an address to be included, others do not. These details are often deliberate tests of attention to detail, and getting them wrong can undermine an otherwise strong application.

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8. CV

The CV is often reviewed before your written application, making it one of the most important documents in the process. Presentation, clarity, and precision are key; recruiters typically skim a CV for no more than **seven seconds** on average scanning for structure, consistency, and attention to detail.

For law applications, we recommend using the Harvard-style CV: a clean, two-page layout with clear subheadings such as Education, Legal Experience, Work Experience, Positions of Responsibility, and Achievements & Interests. Maintain consistent formatting, spacing, and tense throughout. Use a professional font, align dates clearly, and list experiences in reverse chronological order.

Tailor your CV to each firm, emphasising experiences most relevant to commercial law and the skills sought by that employer. For students early in their degree, balance academic, extracurricular, and legal experiences to reflect growth and potential.

SPAG (spelling, punctuation, and grammar) must be flawless, even a minor error can suggest carelessness. Avoid cluttered layouts, subjective descriptions, or unnecessary detail. Each bullet point should begin with a strong action verb and, where possible, highlight measurable outcomes or responsibilities.

Find an example CV template on the next page.

Many firms now use platforms such as Vantage and AllHires, which replace a formal CV with detailed work experience sections. These should be treated with the same level of care. There is no need to list skills explicitly, graduate recruitment can infer them. Focus instead on what you did, the responsibility you held, and the impact you made, using KPIs or measurable achievements where possible. Bullet points are generally preferable for clarity.

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[Name]

[Physical Address]
[Phone Number] | [Email Address]

EDUCATION

[University Name] **[City], [State/Country]**
Bachelor of [Arts/Science] in [Major] Expected [Graduation Date]

- **GPA:** [xx] / 4.0; SAT: [xx] [If you're outside the US, list grades under your system here instead]
- **Honors:** [xx]
- **Relevant Coursework:** [Economics / Accounting / Finance classes, anything business-related]

WORK & LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

[Company Name] **[City], [State/Country]**
[Position Title], [Group Name] [Start Date] – [End Date]

- [Summary sentence stating what you did and the overall results of your work]
- Selected [Client / Project / Transaction] Experience:
  - [Project #1]
    - [Led team to do xx, which resulted in more efficiency / time or money saved / higher sales]
  - [Project #2]
    - [Analyzed xx and concluded that key factor was xx, which made project viable / not viable; resulted in company proceeding with project]
  - [Project #3]
    - [Created xx new method for doing xx; led to increased efficiency / sales]

[Company Name] **[City], [State/Country]**
[Position Title], [Group Name] [Start Date] – [End Date]

- [Summary sentence stating what you did and the overall results of your work]
- [Led team's efforts to do xx by creating/managing xx; resulted in increased sales / profits / cost savings]
- [Analyzed options available for xx and recommended xx based on time and resource considerations; implementation led to successful marketing of xx]
- [Developed strategy for marketing to new prospective clients / fund-raising / promoting brand; resulted in increased awareness / capital commitments]

[Student Club Name] **[City], [State/Country]**
[Position Title] [Start Date] – [End Date]

- [Summary sentence stating what you did and the overall results of your work]
- [Recruited over xx members to club with promotional campaign]
- [Organized conferences, speaker events and community events]

SKILLS, ACTIVITIES & INTERESTS

Languages: Fluent in [xx]; Conversational Proficiency in [xx]
Technical Skills: [List any programming languages – **not** MS Office/Excel]
Certifications & Training: [Any extra courses or programs relevant to finance]
Activities: [Student Clubs, Volunteer Work, Independent Activities]
Interests: [Keep this to 1-2 lines and be specific; do **not** go overboard]

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9. Assessment Centres

Written Exercise

The exercise was a straightforward commercial task. You were asked to adopt a trainee's role in writing a report reviewing commercial aspects of a fictional scenario, similar to the kind you see at open days (things like identifying issues that would be relevant in due diligence and structuring parts of the transaction process, etc.)

The exercise was time pressured. There was a lot to read, and you were required to make a number of points in response to different questions. Whilst it sounds obvious, finishing is key. Do not agonize over which points to make, as doing so will come at the cost of completeness.

Focus on clarity. Use sensible sub headings and brief, succinct sentences to make the reader's life easier. In terms of preparation, basic commercial awareness will be key. By this I mean you should understand the corporate transaction process and be able to perform SWOT analysis on features of example transactions. You should also understand the issues at hand during different legal processes of a transaction (e.g., DD, securing finance, etc.), and be able to comment on the impact of different aspects of the given transaction with respect to these. None of this needs to be high level and will not go beyond the kind of thing you see in other commercial case studies. Whilst there won't necessarily be time to consult it, I would devise a list of common factors worth considering.

It goes without saying that practice is by far the best thing you can do in preparation. If for no other reason, to get used to working under pressure.

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Interviews

By the time you reach a partner interview, the firm has largely decided that you are capable of doing the job. The purpose of this stage is not to test basic competency again, but to assess fit, conviction, and differentiation. This is not the moment for generic answers or recycled competencies; it is your opportunity to explain why you should be chosen over equally qualified candidates, including those from Oxbridge or London universities, who may have been interviewed just before you.

Lawyers and/or Graduate Recruitment are typically looking for reassurance on several key points. They want to understand why you are a particularly strong fit for their firm, why you want to work there more than anywhere else, and whether you are genuinely committed for the long term. This includes evidence of the steps you have taken to understand both the law and the firm, and whether you have reflected realistically on what a career at that firm would involve. Ultimately, you are asked a simple question: why should we choose you over everyone else we are seeing today, and how do you know you can do this job? They will also want comfort that you are not actively considering adjacent careers and are fully invested in pursuing law at their firm.

You should expect a broad and sometimes probing conversation. You may be asked where else you are applying, how other applications are progressing, why earlier academic results differ from more recent ones, or whether you are still exploring other roles. These questions are not traps; they are designed to build a complete picture of you as a candidate. As a result, interviews may venture into areas you have not explicitly prepared.

Expect to be challenged. Partners are highly experienced interviewers and will often push back on rehearsed or "cookie-cutter" answers to see how you think under pressure. There are only two reliable ways to prepare for this. First, don't fake it. If your motivations are genuine and your research is thorough, being pressed should not unsettle you. Go in with clear, well-reasoned answers about why you want to work in law, why this firm in particular, and what makes you well suited to succeed there. A simple, credible, and well-evidenced story is far more persuasive than an over-engineered response.

Second, practise. Comfort comes from familiarity, and strong candidates are able to articulate their thinking clearly because they have tested it aloud.

Finally, ask good questions. These should be thoughtful, well-targeted, and genuinely interesting to you. If you are not engaged by the answer, it is probably not worth asking. Questions should not be treated as a transactional afterthought at the end of the interview; they can form a substantial part of the discussion and may be asked throughout. Interviews are far more effective, for both sides, when they feel like conversations rather than interrogations.

Written by 182nd DLS President & Future Trainee at Kirkland & Ellis

Presentations

Presentations are a common feature of assessment centres and are used to assess how effectively you can structure, analyse, and communicate information under time pressure. In some cases, you may be asked to deliver a short prepared presentation, but more often you will be required to produce one on the day based on a set of materials provided. Presentations are typically short, usually between five and fifteen minutes, and may be delivered to a combination of recruiters, lawyers, and sometimes fellow candidates. You should also expect follow-up questions.

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Strong presentations are clearly structured. Begin with a brief introduction outlining who you are and what you will cover, followed by two or three main points, and end with a concise conclusion that reinforces your key message. Be mindful of your audience: content should be pitched at an appropriate level depending on whether you are presenting to graduate recruitment, HR, or practising lawyers. Use data selectively to support your analysis, avoiding unnecessary detail, and aim to limit yourself to a small number of clear takeaways rather than trying to cover everything.

Your delivery matters as much as your content. Aim for a professional but conversational style, using eye contact and body language to engage your audience. Speak clearly, at a measured pace, and avoid overloading slides with text. Technology should support your message, not distract from it, assessors are evaluating your communication skills, not your ability to design slides. Time management is critical: exceeding the allocated time reflects poor judgement and preparation.

Preparation is key. Practising case study and presentation-style exercises in advance will help you become comfortable analysing information quickly and presenting it coherently. You should focus on developing both technical understanding and broader commercial judgement. This includes familiarity with core concepts such as acquisition structures, financing methods, and contractual protections, alongside the ability to assess whether a proposal makes commercial sense given a client's objectives and the wider market context.

Commercial judgement often requires you to think beyond the immediate legal question. For example, you may be asked to assess whether a proposed acquisition aligns with a client's strategy, taking into account industry trends, economic conditions, or shifts in consumer behaviour. Drawing on current affairs and market developments can strengthen your analysis and demonstrate maturity of thought.

Ultimately, presentation exercises are designed to mirror real client-facing situations. Firms are assessing whether you can absorb information quickly, apply sound judgement, and communicate clearly and confidently, skills that are very much central to effective legal practice.

~Written by Vinson & Elkins trainee

Final note: Always send a brief thank-you email after the assessment centre, without fail. This should be addressed to graduate recruitment or HR, and, where appropriate, to any interviewers or firm representatives with whom you had meaningful interactions. It reinforces professionalism, courtesy, and genuine interest, and leaves a positive final impression.

Durham Law Society

11. Firm Profiles

I. International Firms

Hogan Lovells Cadwalader

Hogan Lovells Cadwalader is a leading global law firm renowned for combining exceptional legal expertise with a clear understanding of business and public policy. The Firm is co-headquartered in London and Washington, DC, with over 35 offices worldwide. The firm delivers strategic, commercially focused advice to many of the world's most prominent organisations, often on matters that shape industries and influence government policy.

The firm's three key practice groups: Corporate & Finance, Global Regulatory, and Litigation, Arbitration and Employment offer trainees the exposure to both high-value transactional work and complex, precedent-setting disputes. Hogan Lovells Cadwalader is particularly noted for its Public Law and Policy practice, which regularly acts in major judicial reviews that sit at the intersection of public interest and commercial strategy. The firm also leads the market in FinTech and digital assets, having advised HM Treasury on the UK Government's Cryptoassets Consultation.

Trainees at Hogan Lovells Cadwalader benefit from a structured training programme with early responsibility, the chance to undertake secondments, and access to innovative legal technology. Beyond client work, the firm is deeply committed to pro bono and inclusion initiatives, focusing on social mobility, sustainability and access to justice. Recognised in both Chambers UK and The Legal 500 for excellence across multiple practice areas, Hogan Lovells Cadwalader continues to be respected for its collaborative culture and forward-thinking approach.

Interview with Future Trainee

My personal experience with Hogan Lovells Cadwalader so far:

My first real insight into Hogan Lovells Cadwalader came through the Rare Discuss Programme, where I attended an insight day at the firm's London office and heard a talk about its Public Law and Policy practice. Hearing Louis Biggs and Andrew Eaton discuss the ITV election case highlighted how the firm combines commercial awareness with a sophisticated understanding of public law, an intersection I find particularly compelling as it is becoming increasingly pertinent. Taking this interest further, I listened to Robert Gardener's updates from both party conferences last year, which revealed how Hogan Lovells helps clients anticipate and adapt to political and regulatory changes. Through the HL Lift Off initiative in my second year, I explored the firm's culture further and appreciated its emphasis on teamwork, innovation, and resilience. Nikki Ogun's talk on FinTech inspired me to research the firm's involvement in advising HM Treasury on the UK Government's Cryptoassets Consultation. These experiences have shown me that Hogan Lovells Cadwalader is not only a market leader in emerging technology regulation but also a firm that uniquely equips its lawyers to proactively shape policy and industry developments, not just react to them.

Why I Chose Hogan Lovells Cadwalader:

I chose Hogan Lovells Cadwalader because of its distinctive position at the crossroads of public law, regulation, and commercial practice. The firm's Tier 1 Public Law and Policy team regularly acts in major judicial reviews, balancing commercial strategy with public interest. I am also drawn to the firm's international scope, with 35+ offices and a strong

U.S. platform that enables trainees to work on genuinely international matters.

My interest in technology law and regulation naturally led me to research the firm's FinTech and digital assets work, particularly its role in advising HM Treasury on the UK's Cryptoassets Consultation. This demonstrated not only Hogan Lovells Cadwalader's expertise in a fast-evolving sector but also its forward-thinking approach to lawmaking and policy influence.

Beyond practice areas, the firm's commitment to inclusion, social mobility, and sustainability resonates with my own values. Having experienced first-hand the firm's approachable and collaborative culture through HL Lift Off, I am confident that it provides an environment where I can continue to develop both professionally and personally while contributing meaningfully to cutting-edge legal work.

Tips for obtaining vacation schemes and securing a training contract:

The key to securing a vacation scheme or training contract at a firm like Hogan Lovells Cadwalader is research and reflection. It's not enough to know what the firm does, you must understand why it operates in certain sectors and how its approach differs from others. Attending insight events, such as HL Lift Off or Rare Discuss, helps you see how the firm's culture and practice areas align with your interests.

When writing applications, I found it valuable to demonstrate a genuine curiosity about the firm's work. I often say to applicants that if I take a couple of sentences out of your application and am unable to determine which firm you are talking about, then it is not personalised enough. Similarly, if you can replace the name of the firm in your application with another and it still reads well, then generally speaking, it is not personalised enough.

Equally important is showing transferable skills. My experiences demonstrated research, drafting and negotiation skills, all vital qualities for trainees. Be prepared to reflect on how your experiences demonstrated research, drafting and negotiation skills, all vital qualities for trainees. Be prepared to reflect on how your experiences demonstrate teamwork, commercial awareness, and adaptability. Finally, stay authentic as firms value applicants who bring individuality and a clear, reasoned motivation for wanting to join them.

And anything else to share with Durham students:

My advice to fellow Durham students is to use the university as a platform to explore, reflect, and refine your interests. Whether through societies, pro bono work, or volunteering, experiences outside the classroom often provide the best preparation for a legal career. Also, don't be tricked by social media into thinking you must know from the day you are born that you want to be a commercial lawyer. Coming to the decision that you want to have a career in commercial law should be a slow, organic, yet engaged process. Only through genuine curiosity and an authentic story will you be able to convince an interviewer of this fact.

At Durham, take advantage of opportunities to engage with firms early. Attend law society talks, network respectfully and ask meaningful questions that show you've done your research. Hogan Lovells Cadwalader, in particular, values candidates who combine intellectual curiosity with practical insight. Developing these traits at university and communicating them clearly will help you stand out. Above all, enjoy the process; every interaction is a learning experience that brings you closer to achieving your potential. Good Luck!

Interview with Associate (Commercial Technology & Fintech)

What made you choose Hogan Lovells Cadwalader over other firms, and how has your perception of its unique strengths or culture evolved since joining?

I was initially drawn to Hogan Lovells Cadwalader because of its reputation as a truly global law firm with offices in multiple jurisdictions, coupled with the firm's strong depth and breadth of expertise across numerous practice areas. As an aspiring solicitor, I was particularly attracted to the firm's training contract structure, which offers each trainee the opportunity to gain invaluable experience by spending six months in litigation, finance, and corporate "seats". Hogan Lovells Cadwalader's commitment to its pro bono work and practice was another factor that made the prospect of joining the firm incredibly appealing.

The reality of my experience as a trainee and junior associate not only matched but exceeded my high expectations. I was fortunate to gain experience in International Arbitration, Corporate Technology and FinTech, and Acquisition Finance seats, and I had the privilege of completing an international secondment in our Singapore office. My commitment to pro bono projects is consistently encouraged and supported through the firm's dedicated BaSE programme and training, as well as through various additional pro bono opportunities regularly advertised firmwide. The firm, my direct supervisors, and my peers have always been incredibly supportive and genuinely committed to fostering my growth and development, both as a young professional and as a specialist in my field of practice.

How would you describe the firm's culture in practice, beyond the marketing brochures?

Hogan Lovells Cadwalader is known for its supportive culture and is often referred to as one of the "friendliest" law firms. This has indeed been consistent with my personal experience as I have felt supported from the first day I entered the office, throughout my entire training contract, as well as during the important transition period from trainee to junior solicitor. The firm's partners are incredibly approachable, open and supportive, and always offer a warm welcome to trainees and junior associates joining their team. Partners and supervisors often reiterate the view that trainee solicitors and junior lawyers are the future of the firm, a sentiment reflected in their supportive behaviour. First-seat trainees are even allocated a "partner mentor," who is often from a different team, allowing trainees to openly ask questions, share thoughts, and discuss topics that may be more difficult to address with direct supervisors. I was very fortunate to be mentored by a senior partner who was very supportive and would regularly meet up with me, especially at important stages of my training contract, to offer me his invaluable insight, advice and perspective. In my personal experience, all teams in Hogan Lovells are supportive, caring, and committed to each member's development and personal and professional fulfilment.

In what ways does Hogan Lovells Cadwalader actively support professional growth and personal development of its lawyers?

One of the main ways Hogan Lovells Cadwalader supports professional and personal growth is through specialised, focused training at each stage of our careers, starting with the induction week at the commencement of the training contract. The induction programme was designed to ease our transition into the corporate world, familiarise us with the new working environment, and help us

build connections within our cohort. As trainees are subsequently allocated to different seats and practice groups, this enabled us to share experiences and gain a broader understanding of various practice areas through our peers. This approach helped us make more informed decisions when applying for subsequent seats. During seat changes, most teams organised welcome or farewell events, facilitating a smoother, less stressful handover and transition between seats. Structured training is provided at both trainee and associate levels, supplemented by practice-area-specific training. The firm also recognises the difficulties of transitioning from one role to another and offers dedicated support sessions during these times, allowing us to openly discuss and prepare for these moments. Upon qualification, associates complete associate-level training courses, which are crucial for our professional development, but also for our professional network, allowing us to meet and connect with other associates across the firm and to share personal experiences, tips and encouragement.

What has been the most interesting or challenging matter you've worked on, and what did you take away from the experience?

As a trainee solicitor, I was often tasked with researching and keeping up to date with the regulatory landscape affecting the financial services sector. In particular, I closely followed the Digital Operational Resilience Act (“DORA”), from the moment it entered into force in 2023 to its official application date on 17 January 2025. Shortly after my qualification, I was fortunate to be involved in a contract remediation project in preparation for DORA, instructed by a large financial institution. I played a key role in drafting the internal DORA playbook, which was to be relied upon during the negotiation stage of the project. This was done in collaboration with colleagues from our German office to ensure the client’s style and risk appetite were

properly reflected. Our team was responsible for remediating seventy of the client's most critical supplier contracts. To achieve this, we worked cohesively as a team, prioritising clear communication both internally and with the client. We maintained high standards, responding to and processing contracts promptly. As is often the case, the negotiation stage proved to be more complex and time-consuming than anticipated. Over the course of the project, I was increasingly entrusted with greater responsibility, becoming personally accountable for managing a portion of the negotiations, reviewing and re-drafting contract markups, following up with non-responsive suppliers, preparing and assisting in negotiations.

If you could give your past self one piece of advice before applying, what would it be?

I would advise myself to attend as many in-person events organised by the firm as possible in order to meet different people in a more informal setting and at various stages of their careers. This allows for a better understanding of how the firm is structured internally and the type of work undertaken by different teams. This also allows applicants to "acclimatise" to the corporate working environment and remove any unnecessary nerves and worries! Unfortunately, my opportunities to do so were hindered by the COVID restrictions in place at the time. Since then, I have had the opportunity to meet students and applicants at various stages of their application processes who are actively participating in and attending the firm's networking events. I have observed the positive impact that attending in-person events has had on their confidence, their overall understanding of the firm and culture, and even their ability to start identifying particular departments or teams they would like to work in during their training contracts. Additionally, it is always pleasant to encounter familiar faces, which helps ease nerves and fosters a sense of comfort, especially during the early stages of a training contract.

DLA Piper

Interview with an associate

Taking part in DLA Piper's Vacation Scheme was a truly enjoyable experience and, in this section, I'm going to highlight some top tips for securing a place on the scheme and making the most of your time with the firm next summer.

My advice for the motivation questions applies to every subsequent step of the process: make sure you are genuinely interested in what you're talking about, and really think about how the firm can foster your passion. I, for example, having studied Arabic at Durham, spoke about legislation surrounding Middle Eastern property development and how DLA Piper's uniquely extensive international offering was a perfect environment for me to explore this interest.

The next step was a virtual interview and, at this stage, it's important to be familiar with what you mentioned in your application, but also to have a more comprehensive understanding of the firm and industry trends, knowing, for example, what teams in your regional office interest you, or how aspects like the firm's One UK Policy and Law& Programme give DLA Piper an edge in the current market.

The final stage is the Assessment Centre. At this stage, it is useful to be familiar with the details of a few recent deals that the firm has worked on to add a greater depth to your discussions. During both the individual interview and group task, you can demonstrate your effectiveness as a prospective trainee by linking your decision-making and experiences back to the firm's values of being Bold, Exceptional, Collaborative and Supportive.

If you secure a spot on the Vacation Scheme, you will submit preferences for the two seats you will work in, choosing from Corporate, Finance, Litigation & Regulation, Employment, Real Estate, and Intellectual Property & Technology.

Throughout the Vacation Scheme, you will be assessed on your performance in your teams. With regard to the work that you undertake, you should constantly be asking yourself how your task fits into the broader landscape of the deal. This will help you to understand how you can add more value whilst also gaining a greater insight into the life cycle of the deal or case. Reaching out to your teammates is another way to ensure your work is of a high standard: asking clarifying questions before embarking on a piece of work, during the task, and taking on the feedback you receive are all essential in developing your expertise and proving your communicative skills.

Alongside the quality of your work, there are several equally important factors that will affect your evaluation, such as your ability to effectively communicate with your colleagues, your curiosity, and how you show initiative in seeking out work from a variety of people. These factors will be largely underpinned by your research into the firm and practice areas that interest you; for example, I expressed my interest in Private Equity and Venture Capital and was therefore able to meet with specific members of the Corporate and Finance teams with experience in these sectors who were then able to provide me with work that aligned with my interests. Your supervisor and trainee buddy will be especially helpful in telling you which members across the firm are best positioned to provide you with tasks that relate to your interests.

The other assessed components of the Vacation Scheme are a written exam and a group presentation that you work on over the course of the programme. On an individual level, attention to detail is crucial in both of these assessments. Focusing more specifically on the group

presentation, the way you collaborate with your team in scheduling and dividing up work will be an essential part of your success.

Finally, as a Durham student, you have various resources at your disposal to prepare you for each stage of the application process and the Vacation Scheme itself. The careers team runs practice assessments, provides CV guidance, and mock interviews, which I found to be incredibly useful. Additionally, Durham has a particularly strong and well-connected alumni network for you to take advantage of. As graduates, we have very recently been in your situation, so will be more than happy to arrange Teams calls or chat on LinkedIn to provide any advice you may need, so do reach out!

II. US Firms

Baker McKenzie

Baker McKenzie is one of the world's largest and most internationally recognised law firms, with 72 offices across 43 countries. Its London office, the firm's largest, sits at the centre of its global network and houses more than 550 lawyers. The team advises on complex, cross-border matters for some of the world's best-known organisations. Recent highlights include advising Rubicon Carbon on a pioneering carbon credits framework agreement with Microsoft and securing a Court of Appeal victory for Vodafone in its dispute with EE.

The firm prides itself on offering trainees a breadth of opportunities. International secondments are a core part of the Baker McKenzie experience, with placements available in offices such as Singapore, Brussels, Tokyo and New York, alongside client secondments with leading institutions including Google, TikTok, Unilever and the British Red Cross.

Baker McKenzie's new London headquarters at 280 Bishopsgate embodies the firm's commitment to sustainability and collaboration. Powered entirely by renewable energy, the building has been designed to support flexible working, with a hot-desking system that encourages natural interactions across all levels of seniority. The firm is proud of making this culture accessible to everyone and provides a diverse range of Open Days and Insight Schemes, with some specifically designed to support underrepresented candidates.

Interview with Future Trainee

My personal experience with Baker McKenzie so far:

My experience with Baker McKenzie began at the interview stage, and I was fortunate to spend three weeks on the firm's spring vacation scheme. I had a positive impression of the firm from the outset. I appreciated the time and interest shown by the graduate recruitment team and the fee-earners I interviewed with. The partner interview was a particular highlight; it felt like an enjoyable back-and-forth conversation that allowed me to explain why I believed I was a good fit for the firm, rather than a scripted, one-sided process.

That positive experience continued during the vacation scheme itself. I spent the first half of the scheme with the Tech and Trade team and the second half with Private Equity. I valued the chance to complete meaningful work, contribute to live matters, and feel like a genuine part of both teams. I particularly enjoyed collaborating with international clients and colleagues, which demonstrated first-hand the exciting opportunities offered by Baker McKenzie's global platform.

Ultimately, it was the friendliness and approachability of all of Baker McKenzie's professional and fee-earning staff that made my decision to accept a training contract offer an easy one.

Why I Chose Baker McKenzie:

Baker McKenzie appealed to me at the application stage because of its breadth of high-quality practice areas and its global business model. As a non-law student, I was not certain which practice area I wanted to qualify in, but I knew I wanted to work with a diverse group of colleagues and clients and to gain exposure to both transactional and

contentious work. The firm's nearly unique mix of global presence and quality work made it the right place to explore these interests.

However, I would also remind prospective applicants that the interview and vacation scheme process is a two-way exercise. Understanding a firm's commercial offering is important, but so is assessing its culture. Commercial law can involve long hours, and it is worth considering whether a firm is somewhere you could see yourself building a sustainable and rewarding career. During my scheme, I was struck by how approachable everyone was, from trainees who took time to explain the background to matters I was assisting on, to partners who made space in their day to discuss my questions. The good humour, kindness and intelligence of the people I met were as significant in my decision to accept Baker McKenzie's offer as its international platform and client base.

Tips for Obtaining Vacation Schemes and Securing a Training Contract:

The most important advice I would offer any candidate is to enter the interview room with clear, well-considered answers to three questions, without appearing rehearsed: why they are applying to this firm in particular, why the firm should choose them, and why they wish to pursue a career in commercial law. Taking the time to understand both the firm's unique selling points and one's own strengths provides a solid foundation and instils confidence that at least three likely questions can be answered effectively.

Commercial awareness is often cited as a key competency, but it is a concept that can appear intimidating to applicants. It need not be. Commercial awareness is not about reciting market statistics or tracking every fluctuation in the financial press; rather, it is about demonstrating a clear understanding of current events and some of their commercial implications. At a minimum, candidates should be able to speak thoughtfully about recent developments in mainstream

news and show a basic grasp of the commercial processes that underpin the City, such as how companies raise capital and the ways in which lawyers support those transactions.

What often differentiates the strongest candidates is their business acumen. The most compelling applicants show that they appreciate not only the businesses of the firm's clients but also the firm as a business. A trainee represents a significant investment for a law firm, and candidates should be able to persuade interviewers that they are worth that investment. This does not mean presenting oneself as ready to manage cases from day one. Rather, it means demonstrating the qualities expected of an excellent trainee, such as organisation, teamwork and a sense of responsibility, combined with the attributes that will, in time, make one a successful and profitable associate: commercial judgment, confidence and the ability to build relationships.

Sidley Austin

Inclusion at Sidley

Since our inception, we have cultivated a workplace culture rooted in mutual respect, open communication, and a deep appreciation for each individual's unique voice. These core values enable each individual to thrive personally and professionally. We believe the most creative and successful teams embrace distinction in thought, approach, ability, and knowledge.
We have two global committees which offer a space that allows our lawyers and business professionals to make recommendations on how to improve firm culture, practices, and services, as well as sponsoring programming and networking opportunities. Both committees have a direct line of communication to our Management Committee and our Executive Committee. This means that all voices are heard and information about the experience of being a lawyer here flows to the very people who make decisions about how the firm is run.

Pro Bono

Pro bono is an integral part of Sidley's culture, and we regard pro bono service as an essential part of our professional responsibility. We encourage our trainee solicitors to get involved in pro bono matters from day one because we know that our trainees want to give back to communities and develop their skills as lawyers whilst doing so.
Under our London pro bono programme, we help individuals and families who face significant barriers in obtaining access to justice. We work with a range of organisations, from small charities to start-up social enterprises, focusing on enhancing community impact and strengthening human rights. We also support front-line legal service organisations by sponsoring a number of Pro Bono Fellowships. Each year, all final seat trainees are invited to apply to undertake a three-

month fellowship secondment in a charity or non-profit, prior to commencing their roles as newly qualified associates.

Application Process – Vacation Scheme

Your application is the first impression you make on us, so take time to prepare it carefully. The form will ask for your personal details and a full breakdown of your education from GCSE (or equivalent) onwards. We expect at least AAA at A-level (or equivalent) and that you are on track for a 2:1 degree. We also use the Rare Contextual Recruitment System and take mitigating circumstances into account, so do include any relevant details.

You will be asked to list up to four examples of work experience, both law and non-law. Focus on what you learned, the skills you developed, and how you added value, rather than simply describing your responsibilities. Similarly, highlight extracurricular activities and positions of responsibility. Show how these experiences have helped you grow personally and professionally, and how others benefited from your involvement.

The application also contains three key questions. When explaining why you are interested in commercial law—and Sidley in particular—demonstrate that you have researched our practice areas, culture, and international reach. When describing a commercial issue that interests you, choose one you genuinely follow, explain its wider impact, and show why it matters to you. Finally, when considering the qualities of a successful lawyer, avoid lists of abstract traits—illustrate them with examples from your own experiences.

Before you submit, always proofread your application and, if possible, ask a friend to check it too. Tailor your answers to Sidley, answer each question directly, and write clearly and concisely. Quality matters more than quantity, and your application should be precise, structured, and persuasive—just like the work we expect from our lawyers.

Interview with Newly Qualified Lawyer (Associate, Global Finance)

What made you choose Sidley over other firms, and how has your perception of its strengths or culture evolved since joining?

- I chose Sidley because of its friendly and non-hierarchical culture that I experienced when I was interning with the firm. Interns and associates at the firm are expected to contribute to their practices on real matters from day one.
- Everyone is very approachable and takes time out of even the busiest day to ensure interns know best practices for contributing effectively.
- This has been reinforced as I have progressed into an associate. The culture is unmatched, being able to grow in an extremely supportive environment with partners who always make time to help you develop.

How would you describe the firm's culture in practice, beyond the marketing brochures?

- It is all about the people. From trainees all the way up to the partners, Sidley has some of the friendliest, down-to-earth, collegial colleagues.
- As a trainee, I have always felt my opinion is valued. Sidley is a place where there is a very proactive attitude towards improvements. Any feedback is always taken on board from people at all levels. At its core, the culture has always been the best I've experienced, and it keeps developing. This progressive approach is what I love about Sidley.

In what ways does Sidley actively support the professional growth and personal development of its lawyers?

- Sidley does this through many channels. I am part of an inclusivity networking group that has an informal mentorship programme. I have been paired with a more senior member of the firm, and we meet up to discuss my career trajectory and business development. It has been a very useful tool for me.
- There is a group SidleyWomen, where we have a group at the firm made up of all levels who meet up both socially and professionally.
- The firm generally has plenty of opportunities to grow and develop. It is very easy to reach out to seek such opportunities. As an example, I was given the opportunity to give a client presentation after I reached out to a partner regarding my interest in public speaking.

What type of work or responsibility have you been trusted with as a junior, and how did it help you develop?

- As a junior, I have been responsible for a lot of process management on deals. This includes coordination with local counsel, reviewing documents, and being responsible for the whole signing process. When I initially started these deal processes, it was more intimidating, but I always had the support of my team. You learn very quickly how to lead because there are always seniors to help guide you to become familiar with how the process works, as well as gain the confidence to take on the work independently.

If you could give your past self one piece of advice before applying, what would it be?

- Starting a legal career can feel daunting, especially if you don't have prior legal experience or industry connections. I would tell myself that there is absolutely no need for imposter syndrome. Believe in your capabilities and remember that you are just as deserving of the trainee role as anyone else.
- Most importantly, trust the process and give yourself the space to grow — you don't need to know everything on day one. Learning is part of the process.

Durham Law Society

Weil, Gotshal & Manges

Weil

Founded in 1931, Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP is a leading global law firm with offices across three continents. Its London office is recognised for strength across its four departments: corporate, litigation, restructuring, and tax, executive compensation and benefits, consistently delivering sophisticated legal advice to high-profile clients.

Weil London achieved top-tier rankings in the 2026 Legal 500 UK for Acquisition Finance, Corporate Restructuring, and Private Equity Transactions (high-value deals). In Chambers UK 2026, 18 practices and 38 individuals were ranked as leaders, with debut recognitions in Commercial and Restructuring Litigation, joining established market-leading practices in Private Equity, M&A, Private Funds, Finance, and Restructuring.

Recent notable transactions include advising General Atlantic on the Permira and Blackstone-led take-private of Adevinta, awarded “Private Equity Deal of the Year,” and guiding an ad hoc group of lenders in the McDermott International restructuring, recognised as “Restructuring Deal of the Year.” The firm also led the Ukravtodor-Ukraine bond restructuring, earning an “Impact Deal Award.”

Weil’s training programme offers a smaller cohort of up to 15 trainees, opportunities for international secondments (typically in New York), and exposure to high-calibre work that accelerates professional development. All lawyers are encouraged to complete 50 pro bono hours annually, counted as billable, supporting charities, NGOs, and initiatives such as RefuAid. Inclusion is central to the firm’s culture, with employee networks including BLAST, Women*@Weil, WeilPride, Belong@Weil, WeilAccessAbility, Multicultural Action Group, and Religion@Weil, fostering community, mentorship, and support across the firm.

Interview with Future Trainee

I read Classics at Durham and was an active member of the University's Law Society. I first met Weil representatives at their Durham University Dinner in November 2023, in my second year. Learning from Patrick Brendon about Weil's multi-specialist approach and culture of trainee development inspired me to research and follow the firm further. I was also excited to hear from Jack O'Donohue about Weil's international secondment opportunities, as I developed a global mindset at school, learning ancient and modern languages, volunteering and travelling abroad.

My first application for a Vacation Scheme at Weil (in my second year at Durham) was unsuccessful. However, I really liked the firm, its people and its practice areas, so I continued to learn as much as possible. I attended Weil's webinars, I met them at the Legal Cheek Virtual Law Fairs, and I completed their virtual experience programme online on Forage.

In my third year, I applied to Weil's Insight Day in October 2024, which was excellent. It confirmed my intention to reapply for a Vacation Scheme for three reasons. Firstly, having experienced other Vacation Schemes, the more formal type of structured training given in firms with larger intakes, I knew I wanted a more proactive and hands-on role from the outset, which Weil certainly affords. Learning from Sol Kaufman at the Weil Insight Day that the small trainee intake and lean deal teams result in early responsibility, partner and client contact and exposure to a breadth of high-quality, meaningful work really appealed.

Secondly, having thoroughly enjoyed my Private Equity (PE) seat on another Vacation Scheme, I was drawn by James Harvey's insight into Weil's market-leading Private Equity practice, particularly how they liaise with the firm's specialist teams, such as Antitrust or Tax. This

distinctive culture of collaboration aligned with my own values of teamwork, reflected in my love of team sports and community volunteering at Durham.

Thirdly, since I was a non-law undergraduate, I had kept an open mind about which practice area I wanted to qualify into. Accordingly, understanding from Henrietta Wirta that Weil is unique amongst its competitors due to its elite reputation in both transactional and contentious work was brilliant. This breadth resonated with my enjoyment of Classics, which, in my opinion, is one of the most interdisciplinary of degrees.

I was delighted to be offered a Vacation Scheme at Weil this summer and subsequently a Training Contract. The Vacation Scheme was fantastic - working on real Vendor Due Diligence Reports and NDA mark-ups gave me a genuine insight into life as a trainee at the firm, where one is encouraged to step out of one's comfort zone.

Durham Law Society

Interview with Trainee

What made you choose Weil over other firms, and how has your perception of its unique strengths or culture evolved since joining?

I applied to Weil primarily because of its market-leading work in practices such as Private Equity, Banking and Finance, and Restructuring. I knew that I wanted to be a corporate lawyer and to work on large-scale, international deals and that Weil was a firm in which I could achieve this aspiration. My perception has not changed since joining: I have been able to work on a range of matters, including for large private equity houses and household-name businesses. I love that no day and no deal is the same.

Additionally, I chose to accept a training contract offer from the firm after my vacation scheme as I felt very welcome at Weil. During the scheme, many people took time out of their busy schedules (and now I know exactly how busy!) to give me insights into their practices and life at the firm. As daunting as vacation schemes can be, I felt that the Weil assessments were designed to help us succeed and that the scheme was as much an opportunity for me to choose the firm as for the firm to choose me.

How would you describe the firm's culture in practice, beyond the marketing brochures?

Weil is a collegiate, "all in this together" workplace: we support each other in the tough times and celebrate each other's successes. Although we work hard, we always work as a team and everyone is well-supported to deliver the best work we can. I am consistently challenged by my work, but I know who to turn to if I am stuck on a task. Additionally, more senior colleagues place emphasis on rest and

wellbeing, so in times where matters are not so busy, there is no expectation to stay late in the office or find tasks to make yourself busy.

People at Weil are also incredibly driven and passionate, both about their client work, but also in supporting our community internally and externally. For example, every fee earner has an annual target of 50 pro bono hours, but many happily exceed this every year. I find pro bono to be a great opportunity to meet new people across the firm and to learn about areas of law I would not necessarily have exposure to day-to-day.

In what ways does Weil actively support the professional growth and personal development of its lawyers?

Weil offers a range of mandatory and optional training programmes for staff at every seniority. In particular, department-specific training is important to ensure our work aligns with current guidance and delivers the best results for our clients. Secondments (at clients, regulators or in our international offices) are also a great way to develop and different secondments are offered at different levels of seniority across the firm, including to trainees.

Mentoring is an additional opportunity the firm provides that I have found useful. As a trainee, you are assigned a Partner Mentor who acts as a key point of support and guidance throughout the training contract, providing a non-judgemental space in which you can explore options for seat rotations or qualification and ask questions about professional development, communication or anything else. I have also found more informal mentors and points of support within my teams and through our inclusion networks. People at Weil are very friendly, so it is not hard to find more senior people in the firm who are willing to give advice and support or to champion you in your aspirations.

What has been the most interesting or challenging matter you've worked on, and what did you take away from the experience?

During my first seat, I had the privilege of working on a matter for the Professional Tennis Players Association and various individual tennis players. This involved court cases and Antitrust complaints in the US, UK and EU. This was an interesting matter for several reasons, not least because tennis is a popular sport with many familiar faces. One thing I enjoyed about this matter was that it was cross-border and cross-team, with many of the initial fact-finding exercises shared between junior team members in the Antitrust and Disputes and Investigations teams across the London, Brussels and US offices.

This experience developed my self-confidence as I was given a lot of trust to research the background of the matter and find relevant arguments we could make to the various courts and regulators involved. Seeing extracts of my drafting, as well as a chart I created, being included in the final versions of the UK and European complaints was a real “pinch me” moment in my training contract.

If you could give your past self one piece of advice before applying, what would it be?

When firms are hiring for a vacation scheme or training contract, they are not looking for a lawyer: they are looking for the skills and attitudes that can make a lawyer. Looking back at my approach to applications, I deliberately omitted valuable experiences from my answers because I did not feel they were sufficiently “legal” to make me an attractive candidate. However, all kinds of work, volunteering or leadership experience can give you skills that would make you a good lawyer. For example, working in hospitality may teach teamwork, balancing multiple workstreams and dealing with a range of stakeholders. Similarly, running a university society may show commitment,

organisation and leadership skills.

The training contract will teach you the unique skills required to be a lawyer at Weil, so you do not need to know these intricacies when applying. Instead, having a good grasp of commercial awareness, a high-level understanding of Weil and its practice areas and a broad set of skills from your life experiences will set you apart from other candidates and help the firm to assess whether you are a good fit.

White & Case

White & Case is a global law firm with more than 2,500 lawyers worldwide. We've built an unrivalled network of 43 offices in 29 countries, an investment that is the foundation for our client work in more than 200 countries today.

Our innovative approaches and nuanced local market knowledge create unique solutions to our clients' most complex domestic and multijurisdictional deals and disputes. We anticipate what they want, provide what they need and build lasting relationships. Our culture comes to life through our three core values: Pioneering, United and Human.

As a White & Case lawyer, you'll work on fast-paced global projects from the outset of your career. In London, our key areas of work include: Arbitration, Data, Privacy & Cybersecurity, Debt finance, Capital Markets, Competition, Construction, Corporate M&A, Corporate PE, Energy, Infrastructure, Investment Funds, Project & Asset Finance (EIPAF), Employment, Compensation & Benefits (ECB), Financial Restructuring & Insolvency (FRI), Intellectual Property, Litigation, Real Estate, Tax, White Collar, Environmental Social Governance (ESG).

Interview with Future Trainee

Why I 'Chose' White & Case

In my first cycle, I fired out 25 applications and secured two vacation schemes – both at Silver Circle firms. In my second cycle, I applied only to Magic Circle and US firms and ended up securing the White & Case TC before being offered interviews at Cleary and Freshfields, which I declined.

However, I think that once you have a few vacation schemes under your belt, you know what you like and do not like about the type of firm you're looking to train at. I felt that the Silver Circle firms did not fit me culturally, and that I would be better placed in a US firm.

With the legal experience of vacation schemes at two reputable firms behind me, I was able to make an informed decision. My advice is to gain as much experience as possible at different types of firms. This can be achieved by attending Open Days or other networking events early in the academic year. By doing so, you can learn about the work and culture of various firms, enabling you to articulate your reasons for applying to a specific firm clearly.

Personal Experiences with White & Case

I have been a future trainee solicitor at White & Case since January 2024, after I was offered a training contract following their Winter Vacation Scheme. This was during my final year at Durham.

My personal experience with the firm can be broken into three stages: Applications and Interviewing, Vacation Scheme, and as a future trainee solicitor.

Interviewing and Applications

White & Case has three application 'stages': online application, video interview, and a Zoom interview with a member of the Early Careers team and an Associate. For video interviews, simply set up a camera and make sure you think through questions around 'why commercial law' or skills that you think a trainee solicitor should have. Then train yourself to look into the camera and answer the questions. I did this for two five-hour sessions, though I don't think you need to spend as much time on this as I did!

The first time I "met the firm" was during the Zoom interview. I was interviewed by an Associate and the Early Careers Manager. The interview was conversational, focusing on my motivations for joining the firm and for pursuing commercial law more generally, as well as some competency questions.

One key aspect I noticed is that the firm values a 'Global Mindset', which aims to assess my ability to work in diverse teams. I was also asked the curveball question, "What does professional presence mean to you?" which required some on-the-spot thinking.

Overall, the interview was conversational, allowing them to ask follow-up questions based on my answers.

Having passed the online application and video interview stages, I also met the firm the night after my Zoom interview at the White & Case careers dinner in Durham. I had the opportunity to meet the graduate recruitment manager in person, as well as a number of trainee solicitors and associates.

Given that the applications and dates for dinners are fixed well in advance, unlike interview slots which are not, it would have been more advantageous for me if the dinner had been the day before rather

than after the interview. However, at the Cellar Door, I managed to interact with the trainee solicitor who would later become my trainee buddy, as well as the Early Careers manager. Overall, I remember the conversations going well, allowing me to share my experiences and learn more about them. I would recommend taking the time to research and use the opportunity to learn more about the firm's work. This will help you navigate your application research as you begin to understand what the lawyers are currently working on and how they think about global issues.

Vacation Scheme – General Comments

Before White & Case, I had completed two vacation schemes without receiving TC offers, both at Silver Circle firms. Perhaps the biggest point of difference for me between White & Case and those firms was how different each participant was from the other, not only in terms of background, but also degree and outlook. I felt as though I belonged to such a diverse group. There were no large concentrations of any one university, and a mix of non-law students within the cohort.

I sat in Debt Finance, sharing an office with a Partner dual qualified in French and English Law. You could quite literally hear the diversity of the office in the multiple languages being spoken around at once.

In terms of the work that I was given from Debt Finance, I did a fair amount of due diligence, such as proofreading, and a bit of legal research. I completed a legal research task for Litigation and a report for some EIPAF clients – I arranged to do this work after coffee chats with those in other departments, as I was interested in their work.

I found that I clicked with my associate supervisor and my trainee buddy. I would often arrive slightly early, have some breakfast and coffee in the canteen, and meet my trainee buddy for feedback on the previous day's work. I think this helped cement our relationship. As a side note, the firm's canteen is very well stocked; I often reminisce

with my cohort about the Christmas dinner put on by the firm in our second week of the vacation scheme.

Vacation Scheme – Assessment

White & Case assesses vacation schemers in a variety of ways that aim to assess a whole host of relevant skills.
I will refrain from detailing my entire experience with the assessment processes to ensure fairness. However, in terms of broad advice, make sure you manage your time effectively, as there will be a lot going on, but it is all doable. You can reach out to your trainee buddy or associate supervisor for advice at any time. Take the opportunity to network, as this is a valuable way to learn about the work and culture in an informal setting. For any written assessments, make sure to proofread your work to avoid silly mistakes!

Future Trainee Solicitor

After White & Case offered me a training contract, they have supported me consistently through my PgDL studies. The firm provides a generous maintenance grant, pays law school fees, and invites us to networking socials both at the firm and other events. As I embark on my SQE this year, I look forward to joining the firm that has already given so much to me.

Interview with Associate (Commercial Litigation)

What made you choose White & Case over other firms, and how has your perception of its unique strengths or culture evolved since joining?

At the start, I was drawn to White & Case because of its guaranteed international secondment – it promised early exposure to cross-border work and I was excited about the opportunity to foster connections across the network. I also valued White & Case's reputation for innovation, which I saw firsthand during my vacation scheme. Every matter I got involved with over the two weeks had a novel and thought-provoking element. The people I met were also incredibly kind and supportive, it felt like a place where people wanted you to succeed. Finally, the chance to work on high-stakes international transactions and disputes – matters that touch multiple jurisdictions – felt incredibly intellectually stimulating.

Since joining, I've witnessed how the Firm lives up to its "Pioneering, United, Human" values: innovation is embedded, collaboration across offices is real, and the culture supports professional growth with strong mentoring and affinity networks.

How would you describe the firm's culture in practice, beyond the marketing brochures?

In practice, White & Case's culture feels far more collaborative and supportive than any brochure could convey. Colleagues across offices and practice groups are genuinely approachable and invested in each other's development. I've experienced a real "open door" environment, where partners and senior associates take time to explain strategy and encourage junior input. The firm's international mindset also permeates daily work – teams instinctively think across borders, and

collaboration with colleagues in other jurisdictions is a regular (if not daily!) occurrence. Innovation is also a huge part of the culture. Whether through the use of new legal technologies or creative problem-solving on client matters, there's an openness to trying new approaches, and everyone is encouraged to share their ideas, no matter how junior you are.

In what ways does White & Case actively support the professional growth and personal development of its lawyers?

White & Case invests heavily in the professional growth and personal development of its lawyers, and this is clear from the start. The support you receive as a trainee is second to none – regular check-ins, multiple supervisors/mentors and plenty of socials! The guaranteed international secondment is also standout, giving trainees the chance to gain first-hand experience in another jurisdiction, broaden their perspectives, and build a global network early in their careers. Structured training is equally robust, and does not stop after the training contract: formal programmes like the milestone training, practice-specific workshops, and advocacy courses are all encouraged.

Mentoring – both formal and informal – is available, and senior lawyers actively guide juniors through complex matters. The firm also supports personal growth through affinity networks, wellbeing initiatives, and pro bono opportunities that allow lawyers to develop advocacy and client-facing skills in meaningful contexts. Together, these initiatives create an environment where you can thrive professionally whilst feeling supported personally.

What has been the most interesting or challenging matter you've worked on, and what did you take away from the experience?

The most interesting matter I have worked on is the Mariana dam disaster case – the class action litigation arising out of the 2015

collapse of the Fundão dam in Brazil. This stands out because of how truly international it was - the case demanded fluency with Brazilian environmental, civil, and corporate law, while managing procedural and jurisdictional issues in the English courts. It was also extremely pioneering, as one of the largest class actions ever brought in England, so there were novel challenges arising almost daily that required creative problem-solving. As a junior, it was fantastic because I had a high level of responsibility from the start. Because the case was semi-fast-tracked, in the period of one year, I got to work on disclosure, expert evidence and witness statements, which pushed me to build my legal skills whilst also ensuring that the case management ran smoothly. I saw directly how having support from senior colleagues and an international network helps to navigate complex challenges.

To me, this experience summed up what attracted me to White & Case in the first place – a truly international dispute, immense responsibility, working on matters that push legal boundaries, in a supportive team environment.

If you could give your past self one piece of advice before applying, what would it be?

If I could give my past self one piece of advice before applying, it would be to focus less on trying to present as a "perfect" candidate and more on showing genuine curiosity about the firm's work and culture. At the time, I underestimated how much White & Case values authenticity. White & Case is looking for people who will fit in with the firm's culture, so showing that you genuinely have, for example, an international outlook and a willingness to embrace new challenges is essential.

I would also remind myself to make the most of the application process as a two-way conversation. Asking thoughtful questions about secondments, training, and team dynamics not only demonstrates interest but also helps ensure that you find a firm that is the right fit for you.

III. Magic Circle Firms

A&O Shearman

A&O SHEARMAN

Interview with Future Trainee

Why I chose this firm

I chose A&O Shearman for a variety of reasons: their impressive, cross-border, complex work; their global presence; their innovative approach to legal technology; their friendly culture; and their commitment to inclusive initiatives.

From a work point of view, the firm is a powerhouse in the legal market, consistently at the forefront of major deals and complex transactions. I was particularly attracted to the prospect of working for a firm that deals with intellectually stimulating work, and after having spent time at A&O Shearman, I can confidently say this is something they pride themselves on.

As well as the work itself, the firm is a pioneer in legal tech, which is the future of the legal industry. Through their own in-house tech incubator, Fuse, and through their own generative AI, Harvey, A&O Shearman is consistently developing and innovating technology which their lawyers use every day. The way they embrace change is something I found to be particularly exciting, and seeing the difference this technology makes in people's daily work lives is a testament to their tech-focused approach.

As a modern languages student, I was also interested in their strength in the global market and work in cross-border deals. The opportunity to go on secondment or work alongside colleagues in other countries and even other continents really appealed to me.

As I mentioned above, I chose A&O Shearman partly for their friendly environment, which I really do feel makes a difference and is noticeable throughout the firm. This culture is also demonstrated in their range of inclusive initiatives, something which is incredibly important to me. There is plenty of information online about these, but some of the ones that I found particularly noticeable are: the approach to pro-bono hours being the same as billable hours; the various affinity groups available to join; and their commitment to social mobility through programmes like Smart Start.

Overall, I could really see myself working at, and enjoying working at, A&O Shearman. I really recommend doing as much research as you can into a firm if you believe it could be somewhere you would like to work.

My personal experience with the firm so far

Every interaction I've had with the firm so far has been overwhelmingly positive. I was their brand ambassador before taking part in their first-year scheme, their summer vacation scheme, and finally being offered a training contract.

Everyone at the firm is so friendly and welcoming, with a focus on collaboration rather than internal rivalry. The work they do is incredibly competitive, working with household names, and they are at the forefront of legal tech innovation. This drive for success is evident throughout the firm, and everyone I have spoken with, and passion for their work is abundant. I felt this really fostered a high-achieving and inspiring environment.

Since receiving my training contract offer, I have returned to the firm for an early careers event. This was a drinks and canapes reception on their roof terrace, for everyone in the early stages of their journey with the firm. This included training contract offer-holders, those completing the PGDL or SQE, trainees, etc. It was a very relaxed

environment designed to allow us to meet or reunite with others in a similar place in their careers. There seems to be a real focus on maintaining contact with the firm throughout your journey, which I really appreciate.

Tips for obtaining a vacation scheme and securing a training contract

One of my main tips for obtaining a vacation scheme or a training contract is to research the firm in depth. If your application could be feasibly applied to another law firm, it isn't specific enough. Find something that the firm does that genuinely interests you, as this authenticity will come across in interviews, etc.

Also, ensure that you are aware of each of the skills you have developed during your time at university and outside of it! Often, people feel as though their work experience has to be law-based, but this is absolutely not the case. If you have legal work experience, that's great, but if not, ensure that you include any part-time jobs or leadership positions on your application. It's really important to recognise the transferable skills you have been developing. For example, I spoke at length about my waitressing job, as it taught me time-management skills, how to deal with customers, teamwork, initiative, etc. If you're applying to A&O Shearman in particular, take a look at the agilities section of their website and try to make connections between each agility and an example of when you've shown this.

Lastly, SPaG is another really crucial part of the application process that often gets overlooked. As more firms are moving towards video interviews, this may become less important, but if you ever have a chance to demonstrate your written capabilities, then make sure that your attention to detail is perfect.

Once you make it to the vacation scheme, don't let the nerves get the better of you! A&O Shearman's vacation scheme is structured in such a lovely way that it allows you to get to know the firm, as well as them getting to know you. Make the most of the opportunities there, speak to lots of different people and ask questions! There is no exit interview at the end of the scheme, which really takes the pressure off. I had a really enjoyable time, and it absolutely flew by!

Assessment centre experience

My assessment centre was online, as I was on my year abroad in Colombia. The firm was very accommodating about this, and although I had some technical issues, they did not affect my experience.

The AC consisted of a case-study interview, a written assessment and a scenario-based/motivational interview. For the case study, I was given a bundle of documents (which ranged fairly widely from emails to contracts to memos, etc.). I had around 45 minutes to read through the bundle and make notes on the question I had been asked. I then had to present to a Partner for 15 minutes (which goes quicker than you think!), which led into more of a discussion for 45 minutes or so on the case material. This involved the Partner asking me questions and pushing me to explain my findings. It was far more relaxed than I had anticipated, my interviewer was really lovely, and it was brilliant to have an hour with a Partner at such an incredible firm. I was then asked if I had anything else I'd like to add or discuss (I didn't, which is perfectly fine) and if I had any questions. I had written down the name and the practice area of the Partner at the beginning of the interview, so I asked him some questions about his work, but also about his personal journey/experience with the firm. Questions don't need to be highly technical (and if they are, make sure you understand what you're asking, as there is a high likelihood that a deal you mention could have involved the Partner interviewing you or one of their close colleagues!), but I do think it is important to ask some. This is a great opportunity to speak directly with a Partner and learn more about what they do.

The written assessment was brought in relatively recently, I believe, but I'm not sure if it is still used. It was introduced as a way of screening written skills, as the increased use of AI has led to a lot of firms opting for recorded answers in preliminary rounds of applications. This task was fairly self-explanatory, but I would stress the importance of checking your SPaG, as this is a really simple but crucial aspect of this task. Attention to detail is very important, and although this was done on a laptop, I'm not sure if a spell-checker was available.

The motivational interview is usually with an associate or a member of HR, and is more discussion-based. I was asked around 4 different questions, ranging from "What would you do in situation X" to "Why A&O Shearman". The idea is to explain your thinking and rationale for the scenario, which may be followed up with new pieces of information to see if/how your answer changes. This was also very relaxed, and my interviewer was equally lovely. At the end, there was also time for questions, the same as above.

I received my Vacation Scheme offer a couple of weeks after my AC, via a phone call from one of the Early Careers team. As far as I know, successful applicants receive a phone call, while unsuccessful applicants receive an email. This may have changed, however. They also offer feedback for both successful and unsuccessful candidates if you reach the AC stage.

Interview with Associate

What made you choose A&O Shearman over other firms, and how has your perception of its unique strengths or culture evolved since joining?

I chose A&O Shearman because I had such a great time on my vacation scheme! I just had a genuine gut instinct that this was the right environment for me: I clicked with everyone I met, felt energised by the work, and could picture myself learning from and working alongside these people day to day. That initial impression has only been reinforced since joining. Whilst A&O Shearman has a high-performance culture, this is grounded in normal, supportive, and genuinely collaborative colleagues, many of whom have become close friends.

Since joining I have also realised how advanced the firm's legal technology is and how transformative it would be for a trainee and junior lawyer. The tools meaningfully streamline the process work, freeing up time to focus on stretching work that is interesting and pushing my development. Since joining, A&O Shearman has also been through a merger, creating a truly transatlantic firm. I believe we're the only firm with fully equal co-headquarters in London and New York; the firm now operates with a truly integrated transatlantic platform. That has noticeably increased the volume of cross-border, especially US–UK, matters I touch and meaning I have built strong working relationships with colleagues across the US and other international offices.

How would you describe the firm's culture in practice, beyond the marketing brochures?

In practice, the culture is one of being pushed to excel while being supported to succeed. Expectations are high and the work is demanding, but for me, this is what makes the work interesting! People make time for each other, knowledge is shared openly, and there is a real emphasis on growth. You feel the combination of ambition and approachability every day: teams rally around busy matters, partners are accessible, and there is a consistent willingness to help you stretch your capabilities whilst ensuring you still feel supported.

In what ways does A&O Shearman actively support the professional growth and personal development of its lawyers?

The most impactful support I've received has been the firmwide approach to stretch people beyond their comfort zone, whilst providing guidance and support where needed. As a trainee, the one-to-one relationship with a trainer - who is a partner or senior associate - meant they understood my capabilities and could set work that pushed me appropriately, ensuring I learnt the most from each of my seats. This focus on development has continued as an associate. I am consistently given challenging work with clear accountability, but I always have partners and teammates who are invested in my development, whether that is through feedback, partnering on analysis, or ensuring I get exposure to clients and high-value workstreams.

I feel that the firm supports personal growth by framing it on the individual, rather than necessarily the standard you might expect for someone at that stage, which means you are consistently being pushed to grow! This ethos is supported by a structured framework of formal reviews and feedback at set points in the year, which are two-way conversations with your supervisor where you can have your voice heard and also make sure you fully understand any feedback and room for development.

What has been the most interesting or challenging matter you've worked on, and what did you take away from the experience?

My first matter as a newly qualified associate was advising the target company on a public takeover, and on the incentives workstream it was just me and a partner. It was a significant step up in responsibility and meant I was the direct contact for the client. I handled direct queries from the company's general counsel and was trusted to manage issues in real time. That experience taught me how to prioritise under pressure, communicate clearly with senior stakeholders, and own a workstream end to end. The exposure to decision makers at that level, and the confidence shown in me, was invaluable in shaping my judgement and growth as a junior lawyer.

If you could give your past self one piece of advice before applying, what would it be?

Don't overthink "commercial awareness." Depth of knowledge on technical matters can be helpful, but the core skill is stepping back and asking: how does this development affect the client, what will they care about, and why? If you train yourself to frame issues through that lens, thinking about the impact, risk, opportunity, and next steps, your answer will be far more compelling than by reciting headlines. Focus on structured thinking and client relevance first; the technical layers can then be built on a solid, commercial foundation.

Durham Law Society

Linklaters

Linklaters

Linklaters is a leading member of the Magic Circle, generating around £2 billion annually and operating from 30 offices internationally. The firm has a strong reputation for advising long-standing financial institutions and multinational corporations on some of the biggest M&A and capital markets transactions, adopting a 'trusted adviser' model rather than competing for smaller, one-off mandates. This strategy has secured relationships with 9 of the world's largest investment banks and 8 of the UK's top 10 listed companies, positioning Linklaters among the top firms by deal value in recent years.

This strength is evident in Linklaters' recent headline deals. In 2024, the firm advised Volkswagen Group on its $5.8 billion joint venture with Rivian Automotive, winning M&A Deal of the Year at the M&A Advisor Awards. They also acted for Rio Tinto on its $6.7 billion acquisition of Arcadium Lithium, which earned Corporate/Strategic Deal of the Year. These transactions highlight the firm's strong innovation and capabilities in cross-border deals that shape industries.

Internationally, Linklaters has pursued a targeted expansion strategy, especially in the US. Rather than chasing scale, the firm has focused on building a distinct New York M&A practice. This has attracted lateral hires such as George Casey from Shearman & Sterling to pioneer this move. This strategy has delivered two consecutive years of 20%+ US growth, cementing its transatlantic capabilities.

Linklaters' training contract offers structured seat rotations with international or client secondment opportunities. The firm also leads in its pro bono and DEI initiatives. They were ranked the No.1 employer by Stonewall for LGBTQIA+ inclusion, and their Race Action commits to transparency and accountability in improving

representation. The Women's Leadership programme gives group coaching for junior lawyers, and flexible working policies to support gender equality and career progression at all levels. Overall, Linklaters stands out as an exceptional environment for ambitious future solicitors.

Interview with a Future Trainee

Application Process

I cannot stress enough how streamlined the application process for the Vacation Scheme is compared to every other firm I've seen.

The process begins with a short application form (this takes a maximum of 60 minutes), where you're required to fill in your personal details, grades, work experience, and extracurriculars.

Next, you'll complete the Capp assessment, a situational judgment test based on Linklaters' Agile Mindset Framework. It's untimed but shouldn't take more than 90 minutes. There isn't much you can do to prepare for this. My one piece of advice is to answer as honestly as you can. The test is designed just as much to assess whether you're a good fit for the firm as it is to help you decide whether the firm is a good fit for you.

You'll then have five days to complete the Watson Glaser test, which is also untimed. Unlike the Capp, you can, and definitely should, prepare for this. Durham offers free practice tests online, and there are plenty of other useful resources, such as guided examples on YouTube.

If you're successful at this stage, you'll be invited to an assessment centre, which can be held either virtually or at the London office. The day is split into four parts. First, you'll retake the Watson Glaser test, this time under timed conditions. Next is a written case study, which

then forms the basis of your Partner interview. In this interview, you'll be asked to expand on your answers and will be pushed on your reasoning to assess both your technical and commercial knowledge.

My advice here is to put your ego aside. No one expects you to have the knowledge of a qualified lawyer. Don't feel the need to talk about topics you don't fully understand, you'll likely be questioned on them and will quickly become unstuck. There's absolutely nothing wrong with not knowing an answer. Be flexible and offer a logical solution. It's not about getting the "right" answer, but about explaining your thinking clearly.

Finally, there's an HR interview, which again assesses you against the Agile Mindset Framework to evaluate your skills and competencies for the role.

Vacation Scheme

After a successful assessment centre, you find yourself at the London Office for a vacation scheme, which lasts two or three weeks, depending on which one you choose. You'll be placed in one of your top four seat preferences.

From my experience, what you put into the scheme is exactly what you'll get out of it. The best way to figure out whether Linklaters is the right firm for you is to make the most of the wide range of opportunities available. From coffee chats with people across different practice groups and backgrounds, to talks from external speakers, and socials, there's always something to get involved in.

You will sit in a room with your principal, who will assign the bulk of your work during the scheme. You'll also be assigned a trainee buddy, which is one of the most valuable parts of the experience. They've been through the exact same process and can offer advice or answer

any questions you might have, no matter how small they may seem.

At the end of the scheme, you'll have a Training Contract interview, based on a task you've completed during your time at the firm. This interview is similar in format to the assessment centre and gives you the chance to demonstrate what you've learned and how you approach real work.

What made you choose Linklaters over other firms, and how has your perception of its unique strengths or culture evolved since joining?

One of the main reasons I chose Linklaters over other firms was the genuine emphasis on people. Linklaters is, at its core, a people-focused firm. Every member of staff and their experience is treated as a genuine priority. In contrast, at many other firms, you can feel like just a number, someone contributing to billable hours rather than being invested in. At Linklaters, I never once felt this was the case. There's a real commitment to supporting your personal growth and development as a lawyer, not just your output.

Of course, no one is there to hold your hand or spoon-feed you how to do everything. But equally, it isn't the cut-throat environment where you're thrown in at the deep end on day one, as can be the case elsewhere. There's a thoughtful balance between independence and structured support, which has really shaped my perception of the firm's culture since joining.

A great example of this is the Global New Lawyer Programme, which all new trainees take part in. Linklaters was the first law firm to establish a truly global development programme for entry-level lawyers.

New trainees travel to London for foundation-level training, build their global networks, and gain a clear understanding of the firm's culture, resources, and expectations. There's also a dedicated Trainee Development team to guide you through seat choices, qualification decisions, and ongoing career conversations. Alongside this, there's a constant flow of training opportunities within practice groups and through the Learning & Development team. Making Linklaters a firm that truly stands out to me.

How would you describe the firm's culture in practice, beyond the marketing brochures?

Against the backdrop of everything I've mentioned above, the firm's culture is one of genuine inclusivity and a strong people-centric environment. During my time at Linklaters, I was struck by how approachable everyone was, even those at the most senior levels would make time to chat with me, no matter how busy they were. It wasn't just a case of being polite- people would actively reach out, particularly Durham alumni, to see if I wanted a coffee chat, and see if there was anything they could do to help me. This makes a huge difference to your experience at the firm, it makes you feel seen, supported, and valued.

There's also a light-hearted, jokey atmosphere that runs through the firm's culture. When I look back on my time there, so many of my memories involve amusing conversations and moments where people were making each other laugh. That balance between professionalism and genuine warmth creates an environment where I definitely wasn't worried about having to change my personality to fit in.

Finally, one thing that really struck me was how honest everyone was. Often with other law firms, it can feel like you're being sold a dream. The reality is that this is a demanding profession, and there will be times when you have to work incredibly long hours.

What I appreciated at Linklaters was that everyone I spoke to was open about this from the outset. Rather than pretending that mental health concerns don't exist, people spoke super honestly about how the firm recognises these challenges and the support systems in place to help you manage them. They explained the resources available to ensure you don't burn out, and what steps you can take if you ever do feel overwhelmed. I feel like I was given a very real and accurate exposure to my life as a trainee and beyond.

What has been the most interesting or challenging matter (on your VS) you've worked on, and what did you take away from the experience?

During my vacation scheme, I sat in the Litigation, Arbitration and Investigations team, which gave me exposure to a fascinating variety of work. The most interesting matter I was involved in was attending a Court of Appeal judgment, where our team was observing proceedings in order to advise another client facing similar issues. I was tasked with taking detailed notes during the hearing, which were later used to brief the client.

Alongside this, I carried out legal research, sat in on client meetings, and helped take minutes, which gave me a rounded view of how matters are managed day to day. What I took away from this experience was the importance of clear communication and attention to detail. Whether it was producing research that would inform a litigation strategy, or ensuring client meeting notes were accurate and useful for follow-up, I saw how every contribution, no matter how small, feeds into the broader case strategy. I also got to experience firsthand how teamwork-oriented the firm is, engaging with people from many practice areas on one matter.

If you could give your past self one piece of advice before applying, what would it be?

If I could give my past self one piece of advice, it would be to start preparing earlier and make full use of the resources around you. There are so many useful tools and opportunities available, and using them strategically can make the application and assessment centre process feel far less overwhelming.

I'd tell myself to get involved with the Law Society from the outset. CV application workshops, networking dinners, and firm events are incredibly valuable for understanding what firms are looking for and for building confidence. I'd also recommend joining the DULS Mentorship Scheme, which is a great way to gain tailored guidance from students who have already been through the process.

When it comes to assessment centres, structured preparation is key. I'd tell myself to use Commercial Law Academy, particularly the M&A course and AC insights, and to read Jake Schogger's Commercial Law Handbook. Alongside that, reading Watson's Daily and the FT news briefing every single day made a real difference to how confidently I could engage with commercial discussions. The FT briefing takes 10 minutes, making it unbelievably easy to build into your day. I used to listen to it on the walk to lectures first thing. Start your day off right.

Finally, as cringeworthy as it sounds, be yourself. There is no point pretending to be the person you think the firm wants you to be. Firstly, it's incredibly easy to see right through, but more importantly, the only person who loses is you. Why would you want to work somewhere that you don't feel like you can be yourself? At the end of the day, they're not looking for a performance, they're looking for someone who fits naturally into their culture. If you're not yourself, you might get the offer, but it won't necessarily be the right fit.

IV. Silver Circle Firm

Herbert Smith Freehills Kramer

Herbert Smith Freehills Kramer is a leading international law firm, formed in 2025 through the merger of Herbert Smith Freehills and Kramer Levin. This union formed a fully integrated transatlantic and transpacific firm, combining Herbert Smith Freehills' scale across the UK, Asia-Pacific, and EMEA with Kramer Levin's strong reputation in the US. Together, we deliver elite client service worldwide.

Our Values are the core of our culture – who we are as a firm, and what we believe. They guide how we behave and how we will continue to succeed. We balance being human, bold and outstanding and you'll find that these are more than our values: they're a lived experience.

Our Trainee Associate Programme is built around your ambition and fuelled by ours: we want to see you thrive, grow and shape a career that's meaningful to you and valuable to our clients. Over two years, you'll take on real responsibility, rotate across four dynamic practice areas, and gain experience that sets you apart. You'll be challenged and supported in equal measure, working with some of the best minds in the business, and open to a wealth of opportunity.

Highlights include:

- City Consortium Solicitor Training Programme in partnership with BPP University for specialist SQE prep and practice area training, commercial and interpersonal skill-building and a blend of digital learning, live workshops and simulations
- You'll also take part in our Business Skills Academy, supporting your development at key stages of your career.
- Four six-month seats across diverse practice areas, with the ability to select preferences.

- Secondment opportunities, both international and client-facing.

As one of the world's leading international law firms, we engage with the most important challenges and opportunities facing our clients. As a signatory to the United Nations Global Compact, we also work with our people, our clients and wider society to respond to the needs that exist in the communities in which we do business, and lead by example to make a positive impact. Our Leading for impact initiatives focus on four key areas of impact: Pro bono legal, inclusion, social impact and sustainability. The firm actively encourages participation in these initiatives, and trainees can even choose a pro bono seat as part of their training contract and contribute to projects like advising at Toynbee Hall Housing Clinic.

Interview with Future Trainee

Why I Chose HSF Kramer

I was initially drawn to HSF Kramer for its strong involvement in Cyber, Tech, and IP – areas that align with my STEM background. The firm's focus on these practices was clear from the Open Day, and during my Vacation Scheme, I was fortunate to sit in both IP and TMT. Since I am not yet set on where I want to qualify, I knew I wanted to work for a firm with exceptional all-round training, and HSF Kramer – through the City Consortium – offers exactly that, providing a solid foundation for any legal career.

Equally important to me were HSF Kramer's values of being human, bold and outstanding. Although every firm states this, I genuinely felt this culture during my Vac Scheme – from partners and associates taking time out for coffee chats, to the small gestures like people asking how my day was. Despite the demanding nature of the work and long hours, the firm's supportive and positive atmosphere made it clear that this is somewhere I could thrive.

Finally, HSF Kramer's strong commitment to pro bono and sustainability deeply resonated with me. The opportunity to do a pro bono seat in the Training Contract reflects the firm's dedication to shaping a better future both within the legal profession and beyond – something that aligns closely with my own values and ambitions.

Vacation Scheme – Application Process

Coming from a non-law background, I initially found it difficult to understand what commercial law really involved and whether it was right for me. That's why I attended as many events as possible, including HSF Kramer's Cocktails & Canapés, Inside the Headlines, and

the IP, Cyber and Tech Open Day, as well as workshops like the DULS Application Workshop. These events were invaluable – they not only gave me insight into the work but also helped me understand the firm's unique strengths and culture. My biggest advice, especially for non-law students, is to interact with the firms you are applying to directly and speak to as many people as you can through Law Soc or LinkedIn. It makes a huge difference in building confidence and figuring out where you're best suited.

For me, the most challenging part of the AC was overcoming my own nerves. My advice for this is to lean into it, remind yourself that everyone is feeling the same, and focus on engaging with the process and other candidates. The interviewers and graduate recruitment team were incredibly supportive and welcoming, which instantly put me at ease. And remember – it's not the end of the world if it doesn't go perfectly. Yes, it's a fantastic opportunity, but keeping perspective helps you perform at your best.

How I Found the Vacation Scheme

The Vac Scheme was such a fantastic experience. One of the best pieces of advice I can give is to go for as many coffee chats as possible. Not because anyone is keeping track – no one is assessing you on this – but because it's a unique opportunity to speak with experts in their field and gain insights that you simply can't get elsewhere. Regarding the actual tasks I completed, a key tip is to ask as many questions as possible! They aren't expecting you to hand in work that reflects the same level as a trainee or requires lots of legal jargon. Just make sure to complete the work to the best of your ability and use all the resources they have provided you.

I was also told that the Vac Scheme is "yours to lose," and I couldn't agree more. The firm has chosen you for a reason, so try to enjoy every moment rather than letting imposter syndrome or stress take

over. Be yourself, be kind, and remember why you wanted this in the first place. This is your chance to experience the work and culture first-hand – embrace it and see if it's the right fit for you!

General Tips and Advice for Securing VS and TC

For applications:

- Do the Forage virtual work experience for each firm you want to apply to – it is an easy win
- Try to go to at least one firm event/open day for the places you're applying to – the more the better. I put particular emphasis on this as I got ACs for the firms I went to the Open Day for
- Utilise the opportunities from the Law Society - mentorships, dinners and networking events are incredibly useful
- Practice the Watson Glaser and situational judgment tests (Job Test Prep and All About Law have good resources)
- A ZipLaw membership is handy for apps and AC prep
- Join the Durham Law Society Mentorship Scheme

For ACs:

- Start preparation early – this saves stress and helps with commercial awareness
- Commercial Law Academy is amazing (the M&A course and AC insights are especially good)
- Definitely get the Commercial Law Handbook - probably what I used the most in preparation!
- Join as many City Career Series webinars as you can (especially the current affairs wrap-ups): https://citycareerseries.clickmeeting.com/
- Read Watson's Daily every day (at least a month or two before your AC) + the FT news briefing

Interview with Associate (Remuneration and Incentives)

What made you choose HSF Kramer over other firms, and how has your perception of its unique strengths or culture evolved since joining?

I chose HSF Kramer originally because of the culture and its varied practice area strengths. As an undergraduate, I got the impression that the firm culture was very collaborative, open-minded and down-to-earth. This impression has proved to be true since I started working here. In terms of practice area strengths, I chose HSF Kramer because it is not only leading in disputes but also in many transactional/advisory practice areas, which I thought, alongside the flexible training contract structure, would allow me to have a varied training contract. This also turned out to be the case as I sat in four completely different seats as a trainee (real estate, remuneration & incentives/pensions, general corporate disputes, and corporate M&A), each of which gave me a unique learning experience.

How would you describe the firm's culture in practice, beyond the marketing brochures?

In addition to what I've already mentioned, we always aim to go above and beyond for each client, which is part of what differentiates us from competitors. Key to achieving this is the firm's commitment to the development and growth of each trainee/associate, as well as ensuring that we are each valued for our opinions, no matter our seniority, and are encouraged to make our views known.

In what ways does HSF Kramer actively support the professional growth and personal development of its lawyers?

My supervisors and colleagues provide me with regular feedback on

my work as and when things come up, which I think promotes a culture of development and growth, rather than it always needing to be formal.

What type of work or responsibility have you been trusted with as a junior, and how did it help you develop?

Qualifying into the Remuneration & Incentives team has meant that I do a lot of ongoing advisory work for listed clients, such as Associated British Foods plc (the owner of Primark and many other well-known brands) in relation to the drafting and ongoing management of their incentive plans. This has allowed me to start developing an ongoing relationship with the client contacts and has given me the opportunity to take the lead on various workstreams.

If you could give your past self one piece of advice before applying, what would it be?

Don't try to present a version of yourself and what you value about the firm that isn't true. Firms value authenticity and integrity, so be yourself.

Macfarlanes

MACFARLANES

We are a distinctive law firm, with a unique combination of services built and shaped around the needs of our international clients. Our unrivalled blend of expertise, agility and culture means we have the flexibility to meet their most challenging demands and adapt to the changing world around us. While many of our practice areas can be found at other firms, our unique mix cannot.

We operate from two offices: London, our main hub, and Brussels, where we focus on EU law. This setup keeps us close-knit and connected. We pride ourselves on being large enough to deal with high-profile and complex deals alongside our competitors, whilst being small enough to maintain the human element of working in law – fostering long-term relationships and delivering bespoke services.

As a Trainee, you could be working on major corporate transactions, commercial litigation or private capital matters, or working for private clients on their most complex affairs.

Your development sits at the heart of our Training Programme. You will complete four six-month seats across different practice areas, pairing hands-on responsibility with structured learning. Formal lectures and seminars, delivered mostly by Partners and Senior Associates, many of whom trained here, give you practical insight into what excellence looks like from day one.

We are committed to inclusion, access, and social mobility, and we partner with organisations including Bright Network, Business Disability Forum, PRIME, upReach and Rare Recruitment to reach and support talented individuals from a wide range of backgrounds.

Our work and teams are recognised at the highest level. Some of our

most distinctive awards are:

- City Firm of the Year at The Lawyer Awards 2023
- Best Social Mobility Strategy at the targetjobs National Graduate Recruitment Awards 2023
- Commercial Litigation Team of the Year at the Legal Business Awards 2023

If you are looking for responsibility from the start, training delivered by people who have walked your path, and the chance to work on market-defining matters within a genuinely collaborative culture, this is the place to build your career.

Interview with Associate (Commercial)

Choosing Macfarlanes:

With so many firms out there, it is a difficult decision to choose which to apply to! What stood out to me about Macfarlanes was the fact that it was a medium-sized full-practice firm with a prestigious reputation. This combination of high-quality work and close-knit, relatively small deal teams was something that really attracted me, as it means as a trainee you really feel part of a deal and feel like you are making a measurable impact. Being a full-service firm, we have a lot of different practice areas for you to try, including ones you may not necessarily find in other city firms, such as Private Client. This was appealing to me as someone who wasn't sure they would be drawn the most to the high-end and high-pressure M&A work that is typical of some firms, especially US firms. A final thing that drew me to Macfarlanes was the quality of the Training Programme – each practice area has a dedicated knowledge lawyer who, alongside other team members, provides front-loaded training for each seat. I found this training to be very practical and it was helpful to get to grips with concepts early on that I would be using throughout each seat.

My experience with Macfarlanes so far:

I have just finished my two-year training programme with the firm, in which I did seats in Real Estate, Litigation, Commercial and Corporate M&A. In each department, I found that trainees are given real responsibility from the get-go, often taking over mid-matter from a previous trainee, which means that you are forced to get up to speed quite quickly! I found this challenging, but it was super helpful for my development and meant that I gained a real understanding of the transactions/disputes that I worked on. Everyone went out of their way to explain things and help me out throughout my seats – there is a real

knowledge-sharing culture, which is really nice as it reflects the kind of firm Macfarlanes is, where everyone wants to help each other in aid of our collective goal of providing outstanding client service. I have also found there to be flexibility in terms of working patterns, where other team members are happy to cover / help you out to the extent possible if you have evening or weekend plans that conflict with work.

Top tips for securing a Vacation Scheme or Training Contract:

I would say just go out of your way to talk to people any chance you get to come to the firm and experience the culture. People are more than happy to grab a coffee and talk you through what makes Macfarlanes special for them and you can then use these encounters to ensure you have a full understanding of what the firm does and what makes it stand out. In terms of the application, I think sometimes people are afraid to write about anything that isn't strictly related to their experience in the legal world, however I personally think that those other things are what make you stand out from others and make you more likely to get an interview. It is of course still important to link any non-legal experience to how it has prepared you to excel as a trainee at the firm by referring to the firm's core values of teamwork, collaboration, resilience, etc. Don't underestimate how tough the application process is, but also try to relax a little on the assessment day, as I found this allowed me to build more natural connections with my interviewers and fellow applicants, which will be noticed alongside your performance in the interviews and tasks.

Interview with Associate (Tax & Reward)

What made you choose Macfarlanes over other firms, and how has your perception of its unique strengths or culture evolved since joining?

Macfarlanes stood out to me as a place that would offer high-quality training and interesting and complex work, while at the same time putting a strong emphasis on a supportive culture. Since joining, I've found that those two things complement each other: when you are comfortable around your colleagues, you have the confidence to learn properly by asking the right questions and working through problems together.

How would you describe the firm's culture in practice, beyond the marketing brochures?

It is a real pleasure to work with so many intelligent people who care so much, not just about doing a good job, but also about ensuring that, as a junior, you are included and learn as much as you can.

In what ways does Macfarlanes actively support the professional growth and personal development of its lawyers?

Aside from the formal training provided at the start of every seat, as a trainee, you are assigned a Partner Principal whom you meet regularly to discuss your development, and as an associate, you are assigned a Development Partner who takes on a similar role. In addition, practice areas have regular training sessions where lawyers of all levels contribute and engage with updates on changes to the law or presentations on recent work. This all contributes to the existing culture of valuing professional development, and in general, I have found people take both their own development and the development

of their juniors very seriously.

What has been the most interesting or challenging matter you've worked on, and what did you take away from the experience?

As a Trainee in Litigation, I worked on a matter which involved advising the trustees of a trust that held a large multinational business on a highly contentious dispute between the beneficiaries of the trust. The matter involved a number of constantly moving workstreams with elements of trust, corporate, fraud and employment law (to name but a few), and involved working across many different jurisdictions.

If you could give your past self one piece of advice before applying, what would it be?

You don't have to pretend to be anything you're not; you can thrive here by being yourself.

V. Regional Firms

TLT

TLT LLP is a UK commercial law firm offering a range of advisory, transactional and disputes services

Key sectors that TLT work in include:

- Clean Energy / Future Energy
- Digital / Technology
- Financial Services
- Leisure, Food & Drink
- Real Estate
- Retail & Consumer Goods
- Public Sector

TLT operates seven UK offices. Its head office is in Bristol (where it was founded), and it also has offices in London, Manchester, Glasgow, Birmingham, Edinburgh and Belfast.

Early Careers Intake & Training

TLT offers multiple routes into legal practice: Trainee Solicitor training contracts, legal apprenticeships, and non-rotational graduate solicitor apprentices.

Training contract structure:

- 2-year programme.
- Four seat rotations, each six months.

Apprenticeship route:

- Years 1-2: Complete the Level 3 Paralegal Apprenticeship.
- Years 3-6: Progress through the Solicitor Apprenticeship, earn a Certificate of Higher Education (Law and Legal Practice), and take

SQE exams alongside the Trainee Solicitor cohort.

GSA route:

- *3*2-month programme.
- Non-rotational, meaning you train and qualify into the same team.
- This is an internal training programme, where you are recommended by your team to be considered.

Sustainability & Net Zero

TLT has a formal sustainability strategy in place since 2021, with a dedicated sustainability team.

They have made a commitment to be carbon neutral by 2025 (offsetting residual emissions after reductions) and importantly, to reach Net Zero (GHG emissions) by 2040.

TLT have also become significant advisors in sustainability and clean energy:

- Advising Ecotricity on the sale of the Electric Highway network (EV charging infrastructure) to GRIDSERVE.
- Supporting Fischer Farms with development of a large vertical farm designed to minimise environmental impact.
- Advising on forestry / net-zero timber plantations.
- Via their future energy group, advising on large scale renewable energy generation & battery storage projects.

Inclusion, Diversity & Social Mobility

TLT provides a range of different networks for its employees including: Ethnic Diversity Network, LGBT+, Disability Network, Mental Health & providing Wellbeing Champions, who are employees trained to support their colleagues with their wellbeing.

Diversity:

- TLT has set a firm target of 35% ethnic minority representation

across early-career roles (trainees and apprentices) by October 2030.
- In 2024, TLT achieved a Silver Award in Stonewall's Workplace Equality Index.

Gender:
- TLT introduced a gender strategy in 2019, in collaboration with Women's Equality Network, where they set a goal to achieve 33% female representation at partner level by 2025.
- This was achieved 2 years early, with 33% female representation at partner level in 2023.
- TLT have launched a new target for 50% female representation at partner level by 2029.
- Woman have accounted for 66% of partner promotions in the last three years.

Social mobility:
- The firm is active in social mobility work: partnering with charities (Ablaze, My Big Career), Speakers for Schools and Aspiring Solicitors
- TLT have been ranked as a Top 75 Employer for Social Mobility for multiple years.

Interview with Trainee

Vacation Scheme Experience:

During my time on TLT's vacation scheme, I experienced first-hand the firm's commitment to providing a meaningful and immersive introduction to life as a trainee solicitor. I was warmly welcomed into both the Public Inquiries, Inquest and Public Law and Commercial Regulatory and Trade (formerly Government and Trade) teams, where I was trusted with real work and encouraged to contribute from day one.

The scheme is structured to reflect the trainee experience, and I found myself quickly integrated into the team's daily rhythm.

One of the most valuable aspects of the scheme was being paired with a current trainee buddy. From the outset, they ensured I felt comfortable, introduced me to colleagues, and helped me navigate the office environment. That connection has lasted well beyond the scheme itself and remains a supportive professional relationship to this day.

A standout moment was attending the COVID Inquiry hearing, where I witnessed Nicola Sturgeon give evidence on Scotland's pandemic preparedness. It was a powerful and timely experience—and I even made it onto the news! The scheme also included a range of insightful talks from partners and senior team members, offering a deeper understanding of TLT's practice areas and values.

Beyond the legal work, the scheme offered fantastic opportunities to connect socially. A highlight was the virtual clay pigeon shooting event with HR and trainees—an unexpectedly fun and memorable way to network. I also took part in a group presentation on one of TLT's core

values, choosing to focus on “Driving Sustainability.” It was a chance to collaborate, be creative, and reflect on the firm’s purpose-driven culture.

Most importantly, I left the scheme with new and genuine connections, a clearer sense of my career path, and a genuine appreciation for the inclusive and forward-thinking environment that TLT fosters.

Interview with Associate (Public Inquiries Inquests and Public Law)

What made you choose TLT over other firms, and how has your perception of its unique strengths or culture evolved since joining?

I chose TLT because of its standout culture, which I experienced first-hand when I met the firm at open events and on the vacation scheme. The firm's sector focus and smaller trainee intake were key factors as I felt this would allow for a more personalised and nurturing training environment. From the outset, I felt that TLT genuinely invested in its people. Since joining over two years ago, my perception has only strengthened. The collaborative nature of the teams means trainees are given real responsibility early on, which accelerates development. There's a genuine sense of camaraderie and shared purpose at TLT that, when paired with their commitment to innovation and client service, ensures it is a place where you're encouraged to grow and contribute meaningfully.

How would you describe the firm's culture in practice, beyond the marketing brochures?

TLT's culture is exceptionally friendly and supportive. From day one, I've found everyone, from partners to support staff, to all be approachable and genuinely interested in my development. There's a strong emphasis on collaboration and there are no silly questions. The firm fosters an environment where you're encouraged to ask, learn and contribute. When receiving instructions, people always take the time to explain, guide and do their best to involve you in meaningful work. Whether it's a quick chat about a task or a broader discussion about career goals, colleagues are always willing to help. This culture of openness and encouragement makes TLT a place where you feel

valued and empowered to succeed. A marketing brochure can't illustrate that, it needs to be experienced.

In what ways does TLT actively support the professional growth and personal development of its lawyers?

TLT provides numerous opportunities for professional and personal growth. As a trainee, I was encouraged to get involved in work that aligns with my interests and career goals, which has made my experience both engaging and rewarding. The firm is proactive in offering feedback, which is always constructive and aimed at helping you improve. There's a clear commitment to professional development, whether through formal training sessions, mentoring, or on-the-job learning. You're given autonomy to explore different areas, and the teams are supportive in helping you shape your path. TLT also promotes a culture of continuous learning, with regular updates, workshops and access to resources that help you stay ahead. It's a place where your growth is not only supported but actively championed.

What has been the most interesting or challenging matter you've worked on, and what did you take away from the experience?

Personally, the most interesting matter I worked on was where I got to make submissions in court (without counsel) for a debt recovery claim, an opportunity that's rare for a trainee. I was given the autonomy to prepare the filings and argue on the firm's behalf, while still having the support of a partner if I had any queries. This experience allowed me to test my advocacy skills in a low-stakes but professionally significant setting. It was both challenging and empowering and it showcases the trust the firm places in its trainees and the value of hands-on experience. It reinforced my confidence and highlighted the importance of preparation, clarity and composure in legal practice and

despite it being outside of my comfort zone, I was happy to get stuck in and get a positive result.

If you could give your past self one piece of advice before applying, what would it be?

I'd tell myself to be confident in showing personality and authenticity throughout the application process. TLT values individuals who are not only capable but also genuine and collaborative. It's easy to get caught up in trying to fit a mould, but the firm appreciates people who bring their whole selves to work. I'd also advise being proactive, reaching out to people at the firm, asking questions and engaging with the firm beyond the application. Whether it's attending events or connecting with current trainees, these interactions can offer valuable insights and help you stand out. Lastly, remember that a training contract is a two-way process, you want to ensure that you are training at the firm that's right for you and the best way to do that is to go beyond the marketing material!