

The Oxbridge experience

EVER WONDERED WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE TO STUDY AT OXFORD OR CAMBRIDGE?

On occasion, Australian law graduates have the opportunity to undertake postgraduate study at an elite overseas university. The YLJ caught up with two lawyers who spent time at the top universities in the UK. David O'Loughlin graduated with an LLB from Monash before joining Allens in 2011. From 2012 to 2013 he studied a Master of Law (LLM) at Cambridge, specialising in international law. Tim Jeffrie completed an LLB at Monash and joined Mallesons before going on to study a Bachelor of Civil Law (BCL) at Oxford from 2011 to 2012.

When did you first decide to apply to Oxford/Cambridge?

David O'Loughlin: In 2008, I received a pro forma letter from the faculty congratulating me for my mark in a particular subject. The letter had a handwritten note from the lecturer suggesting that I should speak to him about postgraduate study overseas. I went, and this planted the seed in my mind for studies at Cambridge.



Tim Jeffrie: I decided that I would apply to Oxford about six months into my time at Mallesons. I really enjoyed working there, but I had always thought further study would be a fantastic opportunity to both study overseas and further my understanding in specific legal areas such as human rights law.



What do you need to get into programs like the Oxford BCL or Cambridge LLM?

DO: I understand that grades are the most important factor, but getting good academic references and coming from a good university also helps. They also take into account geographical diversity.

TJ: The main thing both universities look at is your grades – in your application you usually have to set out both your marks and where you ranked in your level. From what I know, you will most likely need a first class honours degree from a top university. Additionally, you need strong academic references that demonstrate that you are capable of excelling in either program.

How is the study experience at Oxford or Cambridge different from your experience in Australia?

DO: At Monash I didn't live on campus and had a part-time job, so uni was only part of my life. But at Cambridge you aren't allowed to work, you live at your college and do college activities in your spare time. You really come to feel part of your college, and in the end I made more friends from my college than from the course.

TJ: The main difference is the intensity of the course. Doing the BCL is a full-time commitment, and includes 16 tutorials, four 100 per cent closed book exams and a rigorous lecture series that requires an enormous amount of reading. The other significant difference is that you live where you study. Oxford and Cambridge are university towns and when you study there you live on or nearby campus, often in a college attached to the university. This makes the experience all-consuming.

Best moment?

DO: I can't identify a single moment, but there were several days where I felt that I was experiencing all Cambridge has to offer. For example, one day I went to an interesting seminar, went punting on the Cam and then went to a jazz concert. This was very different from anything I did back here at uni in Australia.

TJ: The best moment is a more general observation about my time – I made fantastic friends. Doing the BCL or the LLM is a huge commitment, and you immerse yourself in the experience. I met a fantastic group of friends from around the world that I am still in touch with, and it was great to get to know them.

Most challenging moment?

DO: Leaving. Or the third term, where there are no classes and it is basically two straight months of swot vac with the exams hanging over you.

TJ: The most challenging moment would have to be exams. At Oxford you sit the exams in full regalia (including white tie and gown) and they are meant to be challenging. I think the other reason they are so difficult is because you are studying these subjects intensively for almost a year and by the time exams come around you are exhausted. It really is a long distance race where you have to pace yourself.

What did you learn from the experience overall?

DO: Going overseas without knowing anyone and needing to adapt to a new style of university has given me confidence in facing new challenges.

TJ: First, I deepened my legal knowledge, I did four very different subjects in the BCL and it has certainly broadened my knowledge and clarified what interests me. Second, it has given me the confidence to pursue my legal career, both as an associate and hopefully at the Bar.

What advice would you give to law students or law graduates considering overseas study?

DO: Definitely consider doing it. Start planning early, but focus on what you are doing now and do it well. Also, I found it helpful having been admitted and having legal work experience before I went.

TJ: I would absolutely recommend it. It was a fantastic experience that I will never forget. As for practical tips, I would suggest that you plan ahead and think about whether you want to study overseas early on so you can give yourself the best opportunity of being accepted. Work closely with academics so they can be a reference, do certain subjects that may assist you getting in, and think about funding early as these types of degrees are costly and they often require upfront payments. ■

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