

FT REPORT - GLOBAL LEGAL EDUCATION
Remember to consider reputation, teaching - and fun

By Ursula Milton
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choosing a degree

Ursula Milton shows how to go beyond brochures

What about fun? It is perhaps not the first consideration if you are thinking about applying for an LLM postgraduate law degree.

But according to Alan Khee-Jin Tan, a vice-dean of the law faculty at the National University of Singapore, it would be one of four points he would consider if he were a student again. He says students should think about opportunities to "have a life" where they are going to study. The other factors are perhaps more obvious, and several would apply to anyone thinking of pursuing post-graduate education.

First, have a good look at courses available and the structure of the curriculum. Will you be able to pursue that niche interest in international sheep-herding law alongside options in corporate finance and tax? It might also be worthwhile finding out who is teaching the courses. As Mr Tan says - "are there interesting and leading professors?"

He adds it is important to get an idea of the reputation of the school or university - but he acknowledges this can be hard. There are several law school rankings, but they are not specific to LLM programmes. Instead he suggests that, if possible, it is a good idea to talk to professors because they "generally know their own competitors and will be able to name the top five US or UK schools straight away".

Mr Tan adds employment as his fourth factor. What are the employment opportunities after the LLM, either where you are studying or back home?

As Mr Tan points out, international students very often end up going home to work. The legal profession is protected and an undergraduate law degree from a specific jurisdiction qualifies a lawyer to practise in that jurisdiction, not an LLM.

Angie Raymond, an American, is a graduate who has bucked the trend of going home to work. She is a full-time lecturer and LLM director at the School of Law of Queen Mary University of London, having completed an LLM there in 2004.

However she is careful to point out the degree is no magic formula for finding a job. It should be used for advancing your knowledge. "If you don't know why you want to do it then don't do it," she says.

For those thinking of embarking on the degree, she recommends doing plenty of homework researching courses and, if possible, meeting professors.

She says one of the unique benefits of the degree is that it provides "a great opportunity to come into contact with lots of legal cultures". LLM students will often have already spent several years working and she points out that it is otherwise rare in the legal profession for a group of practitioners and experts to come together and share approaches to legal problems.

Daniel Bradlow, professor of law and director of the International Legal Studies Programme at American University's Washington College of Law, also says this exposure is valuable.

So much so, he urges anyone considering an LLM to "do it outside your home country if you can afford it". And, ideally, outside your legal tradition - because an LLM should be a broadening experience, both intellectually and legally, he says.

He points out many lawyers, not just those in the biggest international firms, will need to be more agile in thinking across borders and jurisdictions as international business grows.

This chimes with the view of Valdis Wish, content editor of an online guide to LLM programmes. Mr Wish says employers are increasingly looking for new hires with international experience or exposure. The online guide provides listings of LLMs around the world, as well as information about funding, a discussion board and blogs, among other things.

Mr Wish stresses that the online guide does not claim to offer advice. But he says he would encourage students to consider the reputation of degrees and institutions, and how those reputations resonate with employers.

At the same time, however, students should not become fixated on reputation. He points out there are many courses on offer and the Ivy League universities, for example, may not be the best places to do a specialised course.

He urges prospective applicants to talk to students and try to "go beyond brochures". They will also help you to understand that all-important question: whether there is a chance of a life outside the syllabus. www.llm-guide.com

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