

Faculty of Law

Degree Planning



Once you make your way through the second year papers, you finally start to choose your own papers. With nearly 50 elective papers available each year, and a requirement that you complete 14 of them, this can be exciting, overwhelming or a bit of both. You could just choose papers according to the timetable, whether they are in your preferred lecture theatre (Archway 4, obviously) or some other random criteria, but this is not the best way forward. You are investing heavily – financially as well as in time and effort – in your future by studying, and we would like to see you get the maximum benefit from doing so.

Career Goals

A starting point is to think about your long term career goals. The type of employer you would like to have, the type of client you would like to have, the type of work you want to do and the kind of place in which you would like to live are all important factors. You might even call it a life plan. Being a big city, big firm lawyer with corporate clients is rather different from being a private client lawyer in a small to medium sized firm in a small town. Or you might want to work in a Government Department (either as a lawyer or perhaps a policy advisor), in-house in a business or local authority or go overseas and work for an NGO or one of the international institutions. Some even choose academia. So many possibilities!

In a very broad way, here are three or four alternatives within each of the choices available:

Employer:

- Law firm - small (1 principal) → large (multi-national, hundreds of partners)
- Government department, local authority
- Non-governmental organisation, not-for-profit
- Inhouse in a business

Type of client:

- Private client and small business
- Commercial
- Government department, local authority

Type of work:

- Transactional

- Advisory
- Dispute resolution, litigation
- Policy

Where to live:

- Big city
- Provincial city or town
- Small town or rural
- Internationally mobile

Specialisation:

- Commercial
- Public
- Criminal
- Family

This list is by no means a complete list and you may end up doing several things within a category. For example, if you decide upon a small firm in a provincial town doing private client work, that could see you doing a mixture of commercial, family and criminal law with a bit of public thrown in every so often. You might also be doing both litigation and advisory work.

In the earlier stage of your degree, it is quite natural for you not to have much of an idea of where you think you might fit into the profession. The best way forward in that case is to have a variety of papers, with a good mix of substantive law papers, one or two skills-based papers and one or two which are more focussed on developing critical skills. I would also suggest that you take advantage of whatever connections you have to get yourself inside a law firm, even if just as an observer, to see what it is like. The more specialised and developed your career goal, the better you can focus on specific papers which will set you up to meet it.

At the same time, if you have a specialised or niche goal, it is quite important to have some sort of back-up plan. Just as an example: I only had one clear idea of what I wanted to avoid when I did my degree. There was no way I was ever going to do any sort of law that required public speaking, and yes, my first job allowed me to escape it. But I was wrong about myself, and spent nearly a decade as a litigator and now an exceedingly long time lecturing.

Planning the content of the degree

So, let's say you want to be a commercial lawyer. You have 14 elective papers: one will be Ethics. You *could* do 13 commercial law papers, but it is unlikely to be the best option for you. Think in terms of doing around six – a mixture of those with broad application and more specialist ones. Papers with a broad application are those which teach you the kind of topics all commercial clients will need from time to time: most obviously company, but I'd also suggest all clients will have secured transactions, maybe be involved in international transactions. Obviously, not everyone wants to be a commercial lawyer: the point is, that if you have a potential career in mind – it might be as a public lawyer, family lawyer or a space lawyer – devote a significant number of your electives to it.

That would leave around four papers (I have earmarked at least two for something else) to pick up a second possible career path, build up skills or to put in a couple of more random papers – either because something seems appealing or things don't go so well and you need to stick in a summer school paper just to get finished. Not optimal, but it happens.

If you don't know what kind of lawyer you want to be, then doing a general degree with a range of papers is the best way forward. This will either enable you to approach a wide range of career options or spark an interest in a particular area. Some papers are almost always going to be useful, such as company law. Others will give you a “job in a box”, in a way, in that they will be useful to almost all clients and in law firms. I'll give three examples. Doing Labour Law means you can advise private clients (as employees and small business owners) as well as major commercial clients and Government Departments (as employers). Law of Vendor and Purchaser and Commercial and Consumer Law do the same: you can advise private clients in their capacity as consumers and do their house transactions for them or commercial clients in their commercial property deals or how to buy and sell goods, with a particular emphasis on how to meet consumer protection law.

Then think of a skills-based paper: we offer negotiation, mediation, civil procedure and advocacy. For a transactional commercial lawyer, maybe negotiation will be the best fit. On the other hand, maybe commercial litigation appeals – civil procedure and/or advocacy would then be better choices. Advocacy straddles all forms of court work, and is particularly useful if you want to be a criminal lawyer. Mediation is a paper well suited to those looking to be a family lawyer or a labour lawyer, as mediation is an important element in dispute resolution.

Many papers are focussed on teaching the substantive law, but doing something that has you thinking about the future, thinking in a more critical way about how well the law is working and what it should or could be doing is a useful addition to your degree. The Faculty has a number of papers which are named “Law and...”: these tend to take this more critical approach. Law and Emerging Technology is the paper most obviously about the future, but there are others. If you are more interested in the personal side of the law, perhaps doing Family Law as a potential career, you might consider Law and Medicine or Law and Society. In the property side of things, Environmental Law gets you thinking about some challenges facing the world and how well the law deals with them.

To summarise the above, here is a suggested plan for your 14 elective papers:

- Ethics
- Six or so to develop a specialization – a Plan A, if you like
- One (at least) skills-based paper
- One (at least) of the papers more focused on a critique of the law
- Four on a second specialization – a plan B.

Try to make your degree coherent: pretend a potential employer is asking you about each paper and why you have taken it. The better you can explain each choice and how it fits a masterplan, the more sensible and wonderful you will sound.

Fitting it all in

Most students are doing a double degree. Most students will have done five papers plus Legal System in first year. This means that at the end of second year, most students will have 29 papers to complete the degrees (if we count all double semester, 30 point papers as two papers). To maintain an even progression through both degrees, you'll need to do ten papers twice, reducing to nine papers for one year. As it happens, six law papers and four non-law papers comes in at 162 points, which is what the University considers to be the maximum number of points typical students can do. Many of our students have at least one year with that workload.

If you are not sure about your career choices, then third year should be seen as an opportunity to explore some options. If you are doing six law papers, by suspending Jurisprudence, you can check out four different possibilities. Try to make sure they are different, to give a good taste of the possibilities. Hopefully, that will reveal some career choices you would like to pursue further and so third year can provide a foundation for more specialised study in subsequent years.

If you want to do Honours or go on Exchange, they will take extra planning. Doing Honours adds an extra 60 points to your degree; going on Exchange normally means a semester (or more) where you are going to reduce your workload to enjoy wherever it is you have chosen for your Exchange. An Exchange semester can just about be squeezed into a five year programme without difficulty, but trying to fit Honours in without a couple of Summer School papers or an extra semester is normally going to be too tough.

Degree and Year planners are available on the Faculty website for you to plan out your time. You can always have Student Experience check the number of papers you need to complete or if you want particular law related advice, just email law.courseadvice@otago.ac.nz or ask at the Faculty Office.

General guidance for degree structure

- There are a number of papers which you must complete in order to receive your degree, but which do not carry any points: LAWS 298, LAWS 398, LAWS 498 and LAWS 499. These are all described on the Faculty website. Please enrol in LAWS 398 and LAWS 499 in the same year you enrol in Torts. Both Faculty staff and the University Student Experience team check for enrolments into these papers, but errors can be made and a lot of work is saved if you enrol yourself. LAWS 398 has tutorials at the beginning of the year and LAWS 499 involves a moot in semester two.
- LAWS 498 (Research and Writing) doesn't require you to do anything as such: every paper you do from third year on will have an optional Research and Writing essay, which will count towards that paper. When you have successfully completed five of these essays, you will be entitled to credit for LAWS 498: try to spread them out evenly across the course of your studies. You enrol in this in your final semester of study: our staff will check to see you have met the requirements, but the onus is on you to make sure you do.
- You need to do Torts and Jurisprudence – they are compulsory elements of the degree. It is

highly desirable that you do Torts in your third year, because of Research and Writing and Advocacy Skills programmes both being tied to Torts. Of course, factors such as unavoidable timetable clashes sometimes makes this impossible. If you will be a third year student not doing Torts, there will be some disadvantage to you, as the Research and Writing programme is aimed at teaching you how to complete assignments set in 300 and 400 level papers.

- It is also desirable that you do Jurisprudence in your third year, but if you have good reason not to, it can be deferred. Apart from timetable clashes, you might want to defer Jurisprudence if you are doing Family Law (another full year paper) in your third year or want to explore possible career choices in your third year.
- There is no need to complete 300 level papers before doing 400 level papers: the only difference between them is that the former run for the whole year and the latter are single semester papers. Some (but not many) papers have pre-requisites and co-requisites which you will need to take into account in structuring your degree. If a paper has a pre-requisite, you cannot enrol in it until you have passed the pre-requisite (e.g. Advocacy requires you to first pass Evidence). A paper which has a co-requisite paper means that both can be studied at the same time. Details of these can be seen on the Faculty website at <https://www.otago.ac.nz/law/undergraduate/papers/>.
- Although Legal Ethics is technically an elective paper, as it is not needed for the LLB, you will need to pass it in order to qualify as a lawyer.
- You do need to be cautious about doing summer school papers between second and third year. One reason is that you will not have completed the LAWS 398 tutorials, so will not have been taught research skills. Another is that you can expect a much more varied teaching style in summer school papers than in second year, including more emphasis on you taking the initiative when it comes to studying.
- It is good to maintain an even spread of papers between semesters and across the period you spend here. Two degrees will typically take 5 years: as you go into third year, you will have the equivalent of 18 single semester law papers and 10 or 11 papers from your other degree to complete. If no special considerations come into play (such as going on exchange or Honours), this equates to 6 law papers (full year papers count as two) and 3 or 4 papers of your other degree per year.

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