

IT'S ALIVE!

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Before I came to university, my expectations of studying law were a mess. On the one hand, I'd been told that it would involve camping in the library each day with a gas mask to stop my dust allergies. On the other hand, I'd also been told that these years would be the best of my life. In a way both were right: I find that I'm enjoying myself while working hard, although there have been some unexpected challenges.

Yes, there is a lot of reading, and it's not just textbooks and articles anymore – you also have to deal with abstract statutes and intricate case judgments. That part wasn't unexpected, but what I didn't realise was that studying law takes a lot of re-reading. Law has its own special language and concepts, and as a fresh law student the first time I read anything I spent so much time getting to grips with the basics that the more complex

stuff just flew over my head. It felt a lot like putting a jigsaw puzzle together without having the picture on the box to guide me. Once I had a mental map of the basics, though, I could go back over what I'd read and pick up on the more advanced points, and then back again to see how it all fit. It really wasn't a case of just ploughing through books one after another.

It also took me a while to realise that different subjects require different approaches. I'd started law thinking that reading it was just a matter of looking up rules in the statute books and cases from law reports. That worked for criminal law, but constitutional law was different; it was a lot more conceptual, and a lot more attention was needed on various theories and how they interacted. In the end I found I had to adapt myself to what each subject required rather than

stubbornly sticking to one approach. Starting each subject is really a process of trial-and-error, but that's fine, because there's plenty of time in the first year to experiment, get things wrong, and in the end (hopefully) get things right.

One area with more trials and errors than most, though, was tutorials. Before I started studying, I had the vague impression that tutors would simply ask me about what I'd read. And that does happen, but if that's all you want you might as well skip university and just read the textbooks and answer the questions yourself. Tutors can be friendly, crazy, cranky and much more, but what they all have in common is that they're brainy – and tutorials are the place to pick those brains. I started making my own list of questions about the reading material, which cut down a lot on awkward, dragging silences and made discussions much more interesting.

And yes, law can be interesting. You might think that the only interesting thing about lawyers is their paycheques, but it's more than that: people who

hire lawyers are looking for justice – or at least a winning argument – and so studying law can be both intellectually and ethically satisfying. Once I stopped prejudging cases as being dull and tried empathising with the people involved, even the most abstract rules became unexpectedly relevant. Looking through the headlines each day and trying to see the legal issues involved in, for example, Fred Goodwin's overblown pension, or the 'taxi rapist' John Worboys, also brought home the fact that the law isn't just found in books. It really is alive, and anyone thinking of studying law should be alive to that fact.

Of course, besides the unexpected challenges of the work itself, there was the challenge of balancing it with everything else. Call me optimistic, but before coming to university I'd visualised myself eagerly spending days in the library armed only with a cup of coffee, burrowing through books like a silverfish on steroids. Once I'd started the course though, it quickly became apparent that without anyone looking over my shoulder, the temptation to just laze in bed till 2

pm and then get up to surf Facebook for another hour sometimes proved irresistible. And on the other end of the spectrum, sometimes you just don't have the energy to have a good time: fantasies of joining moots while simultaneously writing Pulitzer-winning articles for the student paper soon evaporated. After slogging through a few chapters of Constitutional and Administrative Law I found that all I could do was collapse in bed with a pack of Doritos (pack, mind, not packet), which gave me just enough energy to text my friends and cancel dinner.

Looking back, balancing my time was a huge and completely unexpected stumbling block. The reason I slipped up so often was because I wasn't used to organising my own time, and hadn't figured out a comfortable working style. Some people come to university prepared with filofaxes and timetables and annoyingly efficient post-its – I wasn't one of them, so my working schedule veered between extremes of not-working and staying up all night. This isn't to say that everyone should have the same

schedule, but sometimes I wish I'd come to university with a lot more awareness about the balance of work and play I needed. It's definitely something which anyone coming to university, especially to study a subject as intensive as law, should think about.

Still, I wasn't perfect when I started studying and there wasn't a need to be, because it's through studying law and tackling all these unexpected challenges that I developed the skills I needed. So even though there's still plenty of room for improvement, it's gotten much easier and the two big expectations I had – that I'd have to work hard but I'd also enjoy myself – have been borne out. It's been that way for my first two terms, and I can't see the rest of my degree being any different.

