

A Guide to Getting Into Environmental Law

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Thank you for taking an interest in studying environmental law and for contacting UKELA. Whether you are a school student, undergraduate, post-graduate or simply looking for a career change, we hope this guide will help you understand the various routes into environmental law.

This Guide does not presume to recommend any one route over another and should not be taken as definitive.

What should be recognised at the outset is that there are various different routes but what is common to almost all of them is that you will not have the opportunity to specialise in environmental law from the outset.

School Students

If you are currently studying for your A-levels, Scottish Highers or the International Baccalaureate there are several routes into law, which should eventually afford you the opportunity to study some environmental law.

The first is the standard law degree (usually denoted by the letters 'LLB'). Many universities around the country offer law degrees and having one (or the Graduate Diploma in Law, the GDL/Common Professional Exam, the CPE see below) is the traditional route into a career in law. The entrance requirements for the different universities vary and competition for places at 'Russel Group' universities can be tough.

The LLB generally takes three years and covers the core 'law-subjects'. Those core subjects do not include environmental law, but some universities may offer it as an optional module.

Wherever you undertake the LLB you should ensure that it is a 'qualifying' law-degree, that is recognised by the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA).

A list of institutions accredited by the SRA may be found here: <https://www.sra.org.uk/students/courses/Qualifying-law-degree-providers.page>.

The second option is to undertake a 'non-law' undergraduate degree in a subject of your choice (for example in environmental science) and then complete the GDL after graduation. The GDL is a one-year full-time or two-year part-time course which covers only the core subjects of the LLB. It is not offered by as many institutions as the LLB and is not, ordinarily, covered by Government student loans.

Most providers of the GDL require their students to undertake a personal research project during the course; some providers mandate a list of questions students must choose from, whilst others afford students the choice. If you want to study any environmental law on the GDL you would need to do so as part of the personal research project.

A list of CPE/GDL providers may be found here: <https://www.sra.org.uk/students/conversion-courses/cpe-gdl-providers.page>.

The third way into law post A-level/Baccalaureate/Scottish Highers is through a legal apprenticeship (for example offered by the Chartered Institute of Legal Executives, or CILEX). Legal apprenticeships are offered by employers and do not lead to qualification as a solicitor or barrister, however they do offer opportunities to work with qualified lawyers, learning from them. At present, there is no 'environment' legal apprenticeship so pursuing this as a route into environmental law may be inadvisable.

Further information about legal apprenticeships may be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/legal-services-apprenticeships>.

Undergraduate Students

If you are completing a non-law degree, please see the section above on the GDL/CPE and then read the below.

Whether you are completing an LLB or the GDL/CPE, you will need to consider whether you wish to become a practising lawyer (either a solicitor or barrister) or an academic lawyer. This is a decision you should consider during your course.

If you wish to pursue a career as an academic lawyer in the field of environmental law you should consider taking a Masters level course in environmental law and even, eventually, undertaking a doctorate (or PhD) in your chosen specialism.

If you decide that you want to practise environmental law then you will need to decide whether you want to do so as a solicitor, and apply for training contracts, or as a barrister and apply for pupillage (this Guide will not consider the differences between the professions). Getting either a training contract or pupillage is extremely competitive.

In any event, you will need to undertake the Legal Practice Course (LPC) to become a solicitor or the Bar Professional Training Course (BPTC) to become a barrister.

If you secure a training contract your firm may pay your LPC fees and support you through the year.

A list of LPC providers may be found here:

<https://www.sra.org.uk/students/courses/lpc-course-providers.page>.

If you decide to choose the barrister route you can apply to the Inns of Court for funding for the BPTC and/or if you secure pupillage some sets of Chambers (the name given to groups of self-employed barristers sharing overheads and providing pupillage) may allow you to 'draw-down', i.e. give you an advance, some of your pupillage award, which is the money you are given whilst training.

A list of BPTC providers may be found here:

<https://www.barstandardsboard.org.uk/qualifying-as-a-barrister/current-requirements/bar-professional-training-course/bptc-providers>.

To ensure you have the best chance of practising environmental law during your early years of practice you should consider tailoring your applications to firms/Chambers that have some specialism in environmental law.

Note that the CILEX route is available for those with a degree. You do not become a qualified solicitor or barrister, as with the legal apprenticeship route, but rather a Chartered Legal Executive. Further information about this option may be found here: <https://www.cilex.org.uk>.

Post-Graduate Students:

If you are a post-graduate student with a non-law degree please read the section above on the GDL/CPE under the 'School Students' heading.

If you are a post-graduate student with a law degree and non-environmental law masters then please read the section above for undergraduate students.

Career Change

If you are considering a complete career change then you will need to consider whether doing an LLB, the GDL/CPE or pursuing the CILEX route is the best option for you.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Do I need a Masters in environmental law to practise environmental law?

A: No, but it does not hurt to have one. The more specialist environmental law firms/Chambers may consider an application more favourably if an applicant has a Masters in environmental law as it clearly demonstrates an interest in the topic, but if you have studied it at undergraduate level or are simply able to show a genuine interest in the area you should be fine.

Q: Do employers prefer law or non-law degrees?

A: Quite simply it doesn't matter. The important thing is to do as well as possible in either, aim for a first class or upper second-class degree.

Q: Should I do work experience?

A: Absolutely! Get as much work experience, whether at a solicitors' firm, in a set of Chambers (commonly called a mini-pupillage), or elsewhere, as possible. It is invaluable on your CV and shows that you are really committed.

Q: How do I become an environmental consultant?

A: Environmental consultancy requires a good working knowledge of environmental law, but does not require any legal training or qualifications. Instead it is technical and scientific and may be a good option for those who are more interested in the practical implementation of environmental law.

There are many routes into environmental consultancy, but typically you will have to have studied science subjects to A-level/Higher. Some universities offer environmental science undergraduate degrees, but probably the majority of environmental consultants will not have specialised at undergraduate level. Common degree subjects are geology, chemistry and physical geography, with specialism at Masters level. In some cases, this may be an environmental LLM; however this route does not qualify you to provide legal advice.

There is no clear route into environmental consultancy because there is such a wide range of careers. Most companies advertising graduate positions will be seeking candidates qualified to Masters level, but don't let that put you off if you want to apply for a job after your undergraduate degree. Strong candidates with a first or upper 2.1, excellent report writing ability, strong interpersonal skills and a demonstrable interest in the sector are likely to perform well at interview.