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SPECIAL EDITION

ALERT

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GETTING READY FOR YOUR FUTURE CAREER IN LAW

Law students are often under the impression that the skills required to 'practice the law' are only learned through 'on-the-job' training. However, certain skills can be developed, improved and achieved during your studies. For example, a soft-spoken person may be able to present confidently to an audience when addressing a topic they are passionate or feel strongly about. Your interests and activities may therefore influence the skills you choose to develop. Although you will only learn how to practice as an attorney through articles of clerkship, there are numerous activities that you can undertake during your studies which can develop crucial skills.

This publication considers these activities and identifies the skills that one can develop through engagement in such activities

GETTING READY FOR YOUR FUTURE CAREER IN LAW

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It is important that you choose to pursue studying further in circumstances where you are certain about the area of law you would like to specialise in.



Postgraduate studies

Key skills: research, analytical, time management, working under pressure.

Postgraduate studies (for example Masters of Laws) represents a great opportunity to academically specialise in a particular area of the law. Enhancement of your legal research and analysis skills is a given. However, do not enrol for postgraduate studies for the "sake" of doing so. It is important that you choose to pursue studying further in circumstances where you are certain about the area of law you would like to specialise in. In doing so, this will guarantee intellectual stimulation and money well spent as such studies are expensive.

Sport

Key skills: teamwork, leadership, resilience, interpersonal.

Participating in individual sports (like Tennis) or team sports (like Hockey) is a great way to remain fit and active through your studies. It will also provide a great release for any stress or frustration that you encounter as a student. More importantly, it will teach you a lot about yourself (mentally and physically) and develop the key skills identified above.

Cultural activities

Key skills: communication (written and verbal), presentation, time management, research.

Cultural activities (such as public speaking, debating, drama or the arts) can allow you to escape from your studies in a meaningful way. These kinds of activities often result in obtaining personal skills which you can use to your advantage as a candidate attorney (for example verbal communication and presentation skills).

University involvement

Key skills: time management, organisation, teamwork, leadership, interpersonal.

There are a number of societies and organisations that students can join on campus. Some examples include Students for Law and Social Justice (SLSJ), Street Law, South African Constitutional Literacy and Service Initiative (CLASI), Law Clinic, Black Lawyers Association and the Moot Society. Such societies exist at most universities across South Africa. These societies range from academically focussed to community-outreach focussed. There are also social societies which ensure that there is a society for all students to potentially join.

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By getting involved on campus, you allow yourself to be exposed to responsibilities outside of your comfort zone, such as leading a team of students for the first time.



Students can choose to join as 'ordinary' members of such societies. Alternatively, many of these societies run through an elected organising committee which students can potentially serve on. These committee roles include, amongst others, chairperson, secretary, treasurer and events planner. These roles are usually filled through an election process.

By getting involved on campus, you allow yourself to be exposed to responsibilities outside of your comfort zone, such as leading a team of students for the first time. This may be the opportunity that brings to the fore skills that you never knew you had. Whilst honing your abilities and discovering new things about yourself, you are also contributing to a greater cause by your dedication which is will benefit others. You will also learn how to manage their time, to multitask, organisation skills and how to prioritise and work under pressure.

Student vacation programmes

Key skills: attention to detail, communication (written and verbal), presentation, time management, research.

Many law students may have dreamt of becoming a lawyer since a young age but often they are not fully aware of what it takes to become successful in this profession. Student vacation programmes are a great way to gain practical exposure and to understand the true workings of a law firm. Vacation programmes vary from firm to firm, however you can expect to be assigned to an attorney (s). Your day-to-day activities could include

training sessions, consultations, drafting of documents, court attendances and legal research. During your time spent at the law firm, you will learn how the attorneys interact with each other and the nature of their relationship with their clients. By partaking in these types of programmes you experience not only the technical aspect of the law, but also the culture of the firm and what makes working for that specific firm unique.

Part-time work

Key skills: Verbal communication, time management, punctuality, teamwork, leadership.

Students that undertake part-time employment can expect to obtain the 'soft' skills necessary for any workplace. In order to fully understand the dynamics of a workplace, one needs to experience the workplace first hand. The value of part-time work, for personal and professional development, is often underestimated by students.

Various companies offer part-time work for students and this employment usually offers flexibility in working around your university schedule. Part-time work for students could involve work in restaurants, retail, promotions and tutoring. This will mainly teach you time management skills which is vital for any practising attorney plus it will deepen those pockets.

Travel

Key skills: life experience, resilience, adaptability, interpersonal, good judgement.

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Finding the right balance between your studies and extra-curricular activities will be challenging.



Travelling is often erroneously regarded as an activity reserved for the wealthy. Travelling, for our purposes, includes both local and international travel. Students who are considering travelling must look out for the student-targeted packages offered by travel agencies. These packages are often budget friendly and worth considering. The action of saving to pay for a trip takes discipline and commitment. In travelling, you will learn about your own level of resilience, adaptability and sensitivity towards people of different backgrounds.

As an attorney, the ability to value and appreciate your colleagues' contribution is vital. Travelling can help you gain such an ability.

Graduate programmes

Key skills: attention to detail, communication (written and verbal), presentation, time management, research, commercial awareness.

In addition to serving articles of clerkship at a law firm, law students can also consider undertaking a graduate programme at a corporate company (such as KPMG). These programmes are paid 'internships' where students can learn about the practice of the law in a corporate company. These programmes are largely offered by corporate companies in the financial services sector (for example the banks). Such programmes can help graduates to develop the ability to work under pressure, and to manage their time and deadlines.

In addition to graduate programmes, students can also consider a clerkship at one of our courts (for example the Supreme Court of Appeal) after they have completed their studies.

This clerkship usually is for a period of one year.

In engaging in activities outside of one's studies, a future lawyer learns the art of networking and engaging with people, assists one to make better choices in screening out their likes and dislikes and ultimately helps one to grow beyond the confines of the lecture room and only what is comfortable to one, essentially to grow into a more authentic applicant and member of society.

Conclusion

This article has discussed various activities which students can undertake during their studies in order to gain crucial skills. These activities will enable you to grow and develop beyond the confines of the lecture halls and libraries at your respective universities. These skills will benefit you in the long run in whatever career path you choose to follow.

We, however, do emphasise the importance of keeping the main thing (your studies), the main thing! It is not advisable to neglect your studies at the expense of extra-curricular activities. Finding the right balance between your studies and extra-curricular activities will be challenging. With proper planning and careful consideration, you will be on your way to successful career in the legal profession with crucial skills in your back pocket!

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