

# Young Legal Aid Lawyers

## COVID-19 Student Report

15 June 2020



YOUNG  
LEGAL  
AID  
LAWYERS

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## About us

Young Legal Aid Lawyers ('YLAL') is a group of aspiring and junior lawyers committed to practising in those areas of law, both criminal and civil, that have traditionally been publicly funded. We have around 3,500 members including students, paralegals, trainee solicitors, pupil barristers and qualified junior lawyers throughout England and Wales.

We believe that the provision of good quality, publicly funded legal assistance is essential to protecting the interests of the vulnerable in society and upholding the rule of law. As well as campaigning for a sustainable legal aid system, our core objectives are to increase social mobility and diversity within the legal aid sector, to promote the interests of new entrants and junior lawyers and provide a network for people beginning their careers in the legal aid sector.

## Background

Students make up a sizeable proportion of YLAL's membership and one of YLAL's focus areas is to encourage individuals to consider a career in legal aid. We do this by, amongst other things:

- putting on events around the country to enable individuals to gain an insight into legal aid and to network with others;
- running a jobs board on our website to enable our members to see job opportunities in legal aid in one place; and
- facilitating a popular mentoring scheme.

We often promote opportunities for our members to volunteer to get involved with our work, such as through contributing to consultation responses, and we are indebted to our student members for their input.

During COVID-19 we have seen high engagement from members in tasks such as submitting a comprehensive response to the Civil Justice Council Rapid Consultation on Remote Justice. We've seen record-breaking attendance at our virtual events and students have been key to administering our jobs board, compiling legal aid news updates and doing write-ups of our events during this time.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of society. The purpose of this report is to consider the impact it has had on law students (whether those studying law at undergraduate or postgraduate level).

The report discusses the following topics:

1. The disruption caused by COVID-19 to our members' studies.
2. The impact of COVID-19 on exams.
3. Adjustments made by universities for disabled students during COVID-19.
4. The impact of COVID-19 on students' personal lives.

5. The quality of measures put in place by universities to adapt to COVID-19.
6. Suggestions for improvements universities could make during COVID-19.
7. The impact of COVID-19 on social mobility of new entrants into the legal aid sector.

## The survey

YLAL's student survey gathered data between 20 April and 5 May 2020. We received 138 responses from YLAL members who are students. All responses were provided anonymously.

## Respondents

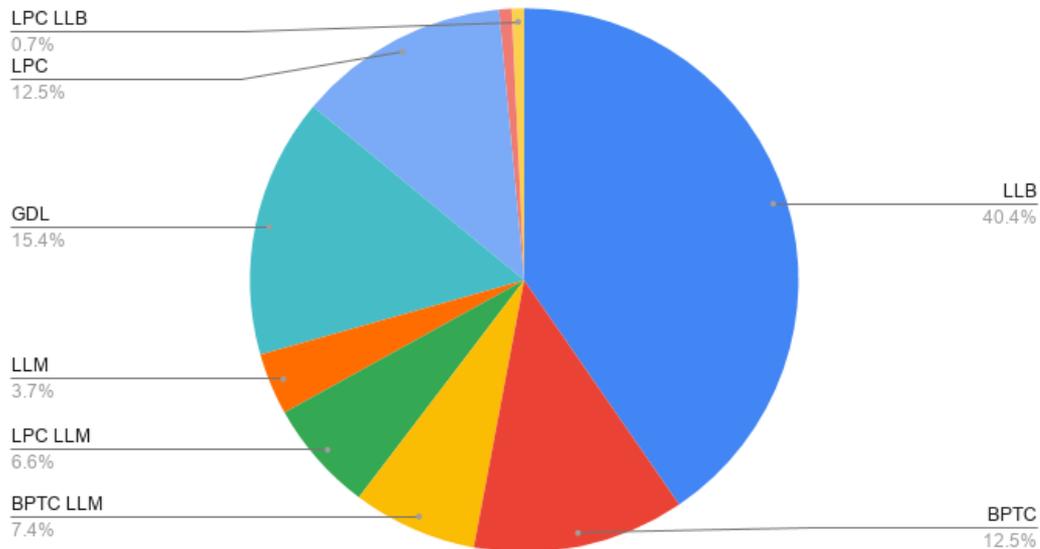
Respondents were students undertaking legal studies at universities and commercial course providers across England, Wales and Scotland:

Arden University, Bangor University, Birkbeck College, BPP, Brunel University, City, University of London, De Montford University, Keele University, Leeds City College, Liverpool John Moores University, London South Bank University, London School of Economics, Manchester Metropolitan University, Northumbria University, Nottingham Trent University, Oxford Brookes, Portsmouth University, SOAS, University of Aberdeen, University of Central Lancashire, University of Chester, University of East London, University of Gloucestershire, University of Hertfordshire, University of Kent, University of Law, University of Leicester, University of Liverpool, University of Manchester, University of Nottingham, University of Oxford, University of Reading, University of Sheffield, University of South Wales, University of Sussex, University of West of England, and the University of York.

It is encouraging to see that YLAL has such a wide geographical reach. Attendees at the following commercial course providers of the Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL), the Legal Practice Course (LPC) and the Bar Professional Training Course (BPTC) were the most well represented in the survey responses, with the University of Law accounting for 29.9% of respondents, BPP at 14.9%, and City, University of London at 8.2%.

Changes to legal education have seen legal education providers develop courses which combine traditional law courses with vocational courses such as the LPC and the BPTC. 40.4% of respondents were undergraduate law students, 15.4% were GDL students and 12.5% were BPTC students, with the remainder studying combined courses of undergraduate or postgraduate law with the LPC or BPTC. Students were studying either full-time or part time, with many also working part-time in either legal or non-legal roles.

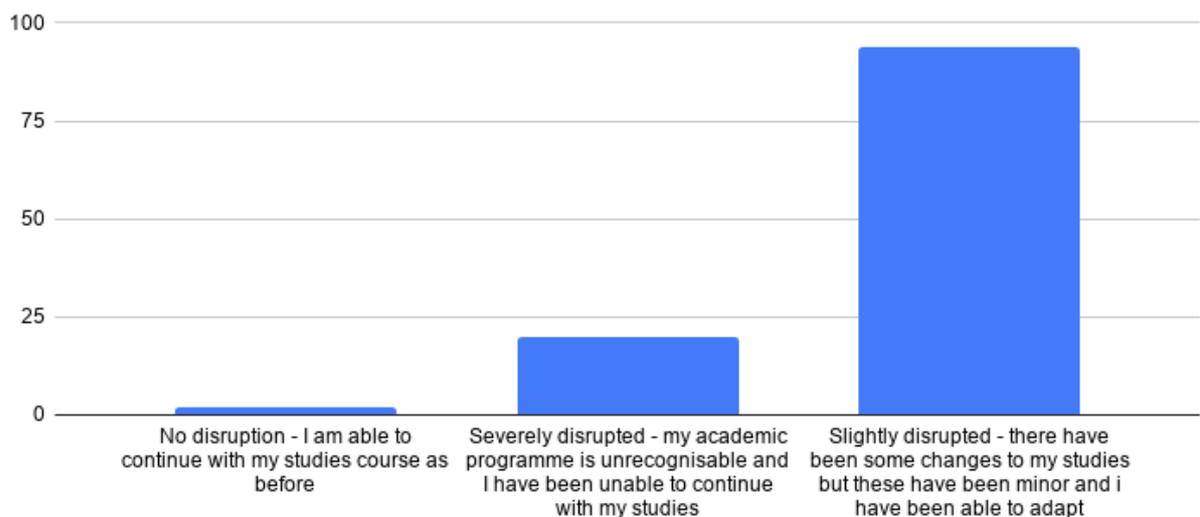
### Course title



## 1. Disruption to studies caused by COVID-19

The majority of respondents (81%) had seen their studies ‘slightly’ disrupted by COVID-19. 17.2% stated that their studies had been ‘severely’ disrupted, while only 1.7% said that they had not experienced disruption to their studies caused by COVID-19.

### To what degree have your studies been disrupted by COVID-19?



Respondents acknowledged the huge pressures that universities, course providers and teaching staff in particular are under to ensure that courses continue during the pandemic. One respondent said, ‘*The circumstances are extremely testing.*’

## Transition to online courses

Although some respondents were already studying remotely prior to the onset of COVID-19 restrictions, with materials provided digitally and all teaching conducted online, the majority were used to physically attending academic settings, and interacting with teaching staff and other students face-to-face.

Course providers have had to change their teaching and assessment formats dramatically and rapidly implement online courses, with lectures and seminars being provided through online platforms such as Skype and Zoom. This has led to academic programmes which bear little resemblance to those which the survey respondents originally signed up to.

One respondent commented, *'Rather than interactive classes we must now watch pre-recorded online tutorials and then the interactive sessions are just Q&A.'* Another said, *'Face to face teaching has been replaced by recorded talks. For seminars this takes the benefit of having interactive support away and has made it significantly harder to get to grips with complex subjects.'*

Many commented that although changes had been made to adapt their course to the present circumstances, much had been lost in the process and as such, their academic programme did not reflect the high fees they had paid; as one respondent put it, *'The course is not the course I began in September 2019. We have severely reduced access to both resources and teaching.'*

Adapting to these changes has been challenging for some respondents. For example, one stated, *'COVID-19 has severely delayed how students receive material because online learning was not part of the initial design of our program. While I have been able to adapt, it is challenging not to be able to have access to campus resources, peers and lectures. Learning has become rigid and it is leaving out the value law students get from interactions.'* Another summed it up: *'online support is not the same as face to face contact hours'.*

Some respondents' experiences of changes to their studies, as recorded in the survey, have been extremely poor. Here is one such example:

*'We have been switched to face to face learning to Adobe sessions that don't work. We weren't given our Easter break and by the end of May had been studying and learning for 13 weeks. We've had time constrained assignments that have fallen on days where our current module opened so we have missed vital EU law lessons. It's not good at all.'*

One respondent, who prior to COVID-19 was studying part-time, stated that they felt better placed to adapt to the changes brought about by the pandemic than their full-time peers, because *'we are well used to independent study on the part time course and therefore are able to continue preparation with pre-existing materials and the small amount of audio guidance provided.'* Others referred to their experience of *'self-teaching'* and joked that their course was now *'a home-learning course! A teach-yourself-the-Bar!'*

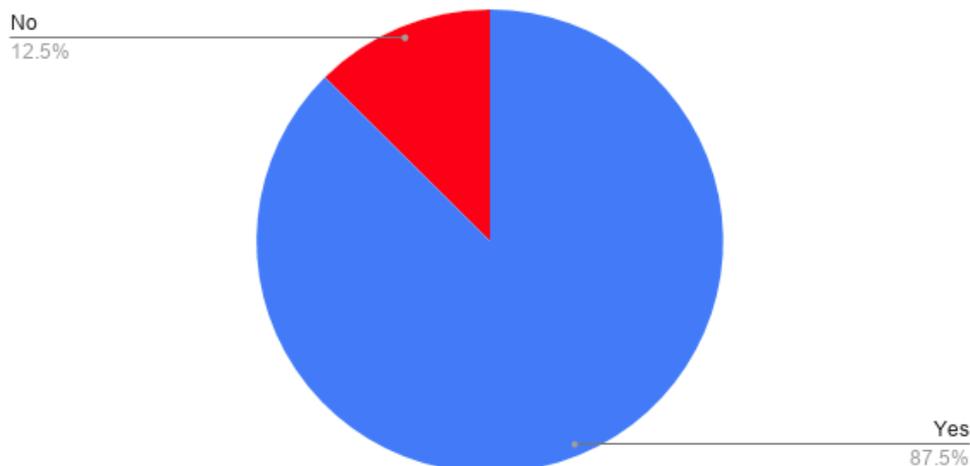
With course material being moved online, it is troubling to hear that some respondents have only been provided with pre-recorded lectures and videos. While it is acknowledged that some students do not have adequate WiFi or are living in a different time zone and therefore are unable to engage in live classes, the majority will draw significant benefit from having classes conducted in real time, replicating (as much as possible) the experience that they would get in person.

### YLAL calls on all course providers to:

- take steps to ensure that, where learning is to take place remotely either during or following the COVID-19 pandemic, it is as interactive as possible;
- ensure that course materials are provided in a timely manner in advance of seminars/lectures to enable students to consider that material properly; and
- obtain feedback from students about the technology used to inform best practice.

## 2. Impact of COVID-19 on exams

If your exams have been affected, have measures been taken to facilitate these remotely?



With all in-person exams cancelled due to COVID-19, the majority of respondents (87.5%) said that measures had been taken to facilitate their exams remotely, largely in a take-home, open-book format, some with slight time extensions. 'E-proctoring' software has been deployed to monitor students during exams.

For 12.5% of respondents, however, no such arrangements had yet been made, and many respondents expressed uncertainty about what would happen owing to a lack of communication from their course provider. One respondent commented, 'I was given no guidance at all, I had to call the University to know what the situation was and when/how the exams were going to be.' Another's response was equally concerning:

*'One of my exams will now take place in a completely different format online, and we have not been told the format of the other. We have a date but absolutely no more information on the content or format of the exam, and it is in a matter of weeks.'*

Some exams have been postponed until it can be decided how they can proceed safely once social distancing rules have relaxed, or arrangements have been made to move them online. There are significant issues attached to holding exams online which YLAL has concerns about, more of which will be discussed later on in this section.

## Replacement of exams with coursework

Although course programmes differ hugely, most will combine coursework with standard assessments. Since students perform differently in different settings, it is generally accepted that a combined approach is fairest.

A number of respondents stated that their course provider had completely removed exams from their courses entirely, substituting them instead with coursework, which one respondent called '*a little concerning*'. One respondent stated, '*As all exams are now coursework-based, I now have nearly 16,000 words to write before June.*' It remains to be seen whether this is the best way to test students' knowledge.

Undertaking exams remotely removes the 'performance' element imputed through traditional exam conditions, which has been detrimental for some respondents. For example, one stated: '*I focus better under exam time pressure and handwriting answers. The take-home exams feel like 'coursework' to me and I have never really responded too well to coursework, preferring standard exams.*'

## Suitability of remote arrangements

Survey respondents also raised concerns about the capacity of online systems to cope with large numbers of students undertaking exams remotely.

One respondent said, '*The exams in June for my first three modules are online and open-book. [My university] have allowed extra time for submission but warn us not to rely on this as they anticipate the system may not be able to cope with everyone submitting at the same time.*'

Another said that their university had given them an additional hour to ameliorate any time spent dealing with technical issues such as poor WiFi.

Advocacy exams have largely proceeded online via video link. One respondent, whose advocacy exam involved submitting a 12-minute pre-recorded video, commented on its artificiality and stated, '*I felt it could easily have been a Zoom call to enable judicial interventions and ensure no multiple recording attempts.*' Another respondent stated that, '*Doing advocacy exams online has been stressful especially considering all year we have been gearing up for in-person exams. The marking criteria requiring eye contact etc. is going to be difficult to gauge.*'

## Bar Standards Board (BSB) exams

Many respondents expressed deep concern about the response by the BSB to COVID-19 and the lack of confirmation around changes to BSB exams. Centralised BSB exams have been postponed

until August 2020, which has caused significant issues for many respondents for whom university accommodation is not provided beyond the end of the traditional academic year, or who had expected to commence pupillage in the Autumn. Furthermore, it presents issues around retakes, as if an individual fails then they must presumably re-take in November, which means that they will not be able to be called to the Bar in November and therefore may not be able to start pupillage.

YLAL welcomes the [BSB announcement](#) on 12 May 2020 that it has waived the usual requirement that only those who have been confirmed as having successfully passed a BPTC or BTT may start the non-practising period of pupillage.

After our survey was undertaken, the BSB [announced](#) that the postponed centralised assessments on the BPTC and BTT would be computer-based. The exams are to be delivered using Pearson VUE's OnVUE online proctoring solution, which uses a combination of artificial intelligence and live monitoring to enable students and transferring qualified lawyers to sit the exams remotely. It is unclear what consultation process was held prior to the decision to hold the exams in this manner.

On 1 June 2020, [Students Against the BSB Exam Regulations \('SABER'\) wrote to the BSB](#) to voice their concerns about a number of potentially unfair and discriminatory features of the exam format. SABER identified these concerns following a survey of 335 BPTC students from 8 providers which, [based on the statistics from the 18/18 academic year](#), is likely to account for approximately 20% of enrolled BPTC students.

Of the 335 students surveyed, 92.6% of them felt that the current arrangements would negatively affect their ability to perform in the exams.

According to SABER, under the proposed conditions, students would be prohibited from leaving their computer for the duration of the exam which will put women at a particular disadvantage. In addition, any reasonable adjustments aside from extra time would be administered in a Pearson VUE test centre, which will expose disabled students to both an increased risk of contracting COVID-19 and to the possibility that they are unable to take their exams as planned if test centres are closed on public health grounds.

SABER recommended that the BSB consider changing the format of the centralised exams in August 2020 to open book conditions with provision for breaks and noted the proposed proctoring service can accommodate breaks if permitted by the exam-setters.

[YLAL endorsed SABER's recommendations](#) alongside more than 460 other signatories.

In a [response on behalf of the BSB](#), Oliver Hanner, director of regulatory operations at the BSB, stated that it would be for BPTC providers to contact students to discuss individual needs and that further guidance would be available as soon as possible.

### YLAL calls on all course providers to:

- promptly and effectively communicate with their students to allay any concerns that may arise as a result of uncertainty, as far as possible;
- issue guidance as to the format and content of exams as far in advance of the relevant exam as possible;
- adopt a 'combined approach' to assessment, incorporating standard exams and coursework; and
- ensure that online skills-based assessments, such as advocacy, are as realistic as possible and make the best use of remote platforms.

### YLAL calls on the BSB to:

- consider changing the format of the BSB exams in August 2020 to open book conditions with provision for breaks and/or ensure the proposed proctoring service accommodates breaks;
- issue guidance for course providers and students as soon as possible as to the types of reasonable adjustment that ought to be expected; and
- consult with students about the provision for reasonable adjustments in light of that guidance.

## 3. Adjustments for disabled students

Of those surveyed, 8% of YLAL's student members recorded having a disability. Those with mental health conditions have found living through COVID-19 and studying to be an intensely difficult experience.

One respondent who suffers from depression stated that the transition away from the traditional classroom setting and the loss of normal routines had exacerbated their mental health issues, which in turn was impacting their ability to study. Another respondent, who has ADHD, stated that *'the new methods of learning as well as being limited to working in one environment every day has been detrimental'*.

Under the Equality Act 2010, educational providers are required not to discriminate against disabled students, and to make reasonable adjustments to course delivery and assessment to ensure that disabled students are not placed at a 'substantial disadvantage' in relation to their non-disabled peers. In addition, all universities are subject to the public sector equality duty which requires them to promote and embed disability equality proactively across institutional structures, hierarchies, policies, procedures and practice.

Respondents reported that some adjustments had been put in place, for example the provision of extra time for exams taken remotely and remote access to counselling support, but these appeared limited, and some reported that they had yet to be provided with details of the adjustments they could expect.

One respondent stated,

*'It is more difficult for me to study online, which I have made known but I haven't received any help. I am more concerned about exams, which are online, because I find it difficult to read from a screen. But I am not allowed to print the exam paper to read it, or to use the software that I receive from DSA to help me read from the screen.'*

YLAL is extremely concerned about the arrangements in place for assessments and the implications these have on all students, but disabled students in particular. According to one respondent,

*'Many on our course think a 3-and-a-half hour online exam where 3 essay questions need to be answered is incredibly harsh considering most universities will allow 24hrs at this point in time as it's supposed to be open book.'*

#### **YLAL calls on all course providers to:**

- make provision for a range of reasonable adjustments taking into account the needs of each individual student;
- consult students about alternatives, such as printing exam papers, and how they might be facilitated; and
- inform students of any adjustments at the earliest opportunity.

## **4. Impact of COVID-19 on students' personal lives**

Understandably, COVID-19 has had far-reaching effects on students, their personal lives and their ability to continue with their studies.

### **Personal Finances**

Many students stressed the negative impact of COVID-19 on their personal finances. Many students are reliant on part-time jobs to support themselves during their studies. COVID-19 has meant that many traditional opportunities to earn money alongside studying are no longer available. Some students have lost their jobs or are unable to find work to pay for their studies and support themselves.

Students that are supported financially by parents who have lost their jobs are also worried about their future financial situation and ability to pay their university fees. This is a particular problem where exams have been delayed, for example for students on the BPTC course who will sit central exams in August 2020 at the earliest instead of April 2020, as budgets now have to stretch further than they were intended to. This also means that students will have to revise over the summer, meaning less time to work to support themselves.

A selection of responses illustrate the precarious situation many students now find themselves in:

*'I lost the job that sustained me and enabled me to stay in London and finish my LPC. I had to apply for UC and JSA [...] At the moment I do not know if I will be able to pay for my rent until my exams, it gives me a lot of stress.'*

*'I lost my part time job and am finding it very difficult to find another / a full time job for after exams. My family are unable to support me and my student loan only covers so much, in a month's time I will need to be earning money and am not sure where this will come from at the moment.'*

*'I only have enough to cover until June 2020 when the course was supposed to finish. I was hoping to work full time after that to pay my rent and bills. Now, given the exams are in August this will be very difficult.'*

*'I had quit my job about three weeks before the crisis happened so I could focus on my exams full time and was expecting to be back in work by June. I am now facing not having finished my exams until August/ September and having no money.'*

*'Exams will now be in August. I cannot afford to not work to support myself through that period. I don't know what I will do.'*

*'Delay in exams, delay in call date which has resulted in the future being called into question. Personal finances have taken a massive hit. My mental health is my main concern.'*

Other students were scheduled to return to jobs when their professional courses finished at the end of May 2020. Uncertainty surrounding when the BPTC central exams will go ahead has made it difficult for individuals to plan whether to return to work. It has also caused uncertainty about when/whether students with pupillage places next year will be able to commence their training.

One student stated:

*'It will also affect when I'm able to go back to work full time without knowing when and whether the August exams will go ahead as I was supposed to return to work in June.'*

Some responses highlighted that stress about their financial circumstances is made worse by the fact that they are still having to pay fees to their universities despite being unable to attend in person and access the same resources. As one respondent put it, *'[The] impact on my personal finances hasn't been considered when the uni are still chasing fees.'* Another stated, *'I pay for my course monthly out of my wages and as I have been placed on furlough this is now more difficult due to the wage reduction.'*

Responses also highlighted that students face uncertainties surrounding accommodation. Some students that have had to return home are still paying rent in the places where they study which has caused financial pressures.

One student stated, *'I have to continue to pay rent even though I am not in Nottingham, and there are very few jobs available for me to earn before I begin the bar course in September.'* Another said, *'I cannot work and do not qualify for aid so I am having to use the savings set aside for fees in order to pay rent and bills.'*

## Academic Performance

Some students highlighted difficulties completing their studies online and felt that this has negatively impacted their learning. In particular some students find it difficult to stay motivated without the support of their peers or adequate working environment at home. The responses below were typical:

*'It is very difficult to keep attention on a screen for classes. I really benefit from the in-person classes, as the interactions both help maintain my attention for the duration of the class and motivate me for the class preparation work.'*

*'I sat four exams during the early stages of coronavirus/ lockdown. The exams which were able to be assessed in the centre went poorly as I don't think anyone was in the right headspace to be sitting them and it was wrong for them to proceed.'*

*'The lack of libraries and study spaces also has a huge impact when you don't have the resources or space at home, I don't even have a desk.'*

*'It's been a real battle getting myself motivated to study.'*

Respondents raised concerns about the accessibility of lessons. One stated that participation in online learning can be difficult if there are network issues. Other students voiced concerns about difficulties in accessing university resources online:

*'As I can no longer access the library, and do not have access to high quality technology, the financial impact of Covid-19 has also meant that although I am finding it difficult to access study materials, I cannot afford to purchase resources I would have been able to access in the university library.'*

There have also been issues regarding interaction between university teachers and their students. One student said that there had been no face to face contact with their tutor:

*'We have simply been left to do the tasks previously set which have not been properly amended to reflect learning from home with no interaction.'*

Legal professional courses such as the LPC and BPTC are designed to prepare students for legal practice. Some students felt that being unable to do certain exercises in tutorials, such as advocacy exercises, impacted on their preparation for life in practice.

One student stated:

*'I'm also concerned about the fact that exams are being changed and being replaced with coursework style assessment because the BPTC is very practical and we are supposed to be learning how to 'be on our feet' - remote learning does not allow for us to develop these vital skills we need to practice as successful barristers.'*

Some students highlighted the impact of uncertainty regarding the future on their ability to study. One respondent stated,

*'The pressure of law school coupled with the uncertainty of not being able to return home (I am an international student) plus the worry of what happens after this semester is over leaves me very unsure about how to navigate [...] through this.'*

## **Caring Responsibilities**

Responses highlighted concerns about the impact of caring responsibilities on academic performance. Children are home from school as a result of the closure of schools and nurseries which puts additional stress on those trying to study. Some respondents stated that they have to juggle caring responsibilities, work, and studies, and that universities and course providers needed to do more to accommodate their needs:

*'Studies remain as demanding, working from home and playing teacher for 3 kids.'*

Another said,

*'Too much to juggle. Parent, working from home, kids on home online school and studies too, no peace, have to work after they have gone to bed. Working silly hours to complete work and studies. Frequent 2am finishes.'*

Other students have to help care for family members with caring needs:

*'I have had to return home where I have to help care for my disabled sister as she has much fewer carers coming now. This has made it difficult for me to study as much as I would if I was still at University.'*

*'I am a student with caring responsibilities which I was previously able to get help with, allowing me to set aside time to attend university and complete work and revision. Living with an extremely vulnerable family member for whom I care now means I have no external help and am finding it very difficult to set aside time to complete university work, putting me at an extreme detriment compared to my peers.'*

## Mental Health

Some students stressed the negative impact of COVID-19 on their mental health. For some this was linked to worries about personal finances and being isolated from their classmates. Others are continuing to study while dealing with the loss of loved ones.

One student said,

*'My biggest challenge is lack of structure and studying requires a large level of self motivation under normal circumstances, to motivate yourself without any sort of structure or change of environment, on top of the anxiety which comes with a lockdown and a global pandemic, has felt suffocating.'*

Another stressed concern about the *'Impact upon academic performance due to significant worsening in mental health conditions due to isolation and uncertainty.'*

## Immigration

International students voiced concerns about whether they will be able to travel to commence courses beginning next year. Others have an uncertain immigration status and COVID-19 has led to delays in obtaining travel documents and other support:

*'I'm a refugee and applied for my travel document before the pandemic more than 10 week ago [...] I can't apply for my student finance [...] My brother is an asylum seeker, he doesn't even know what is going to happen.'*

YLAL is also concerned about student members who have had to leave the UK due to COVID-19 and the impact this will have upon their immigration status, as being outside of the country for more than 6 months creates a break in continuous residence and may cause difficulties for future visa applications.

## Employability

Some students are concerned that their future career prospects have been impacted by COVID-19. One student stated:

*'I have not been able to engage in any work experience/placement schemes/pro bono because of the lock down. I'm worried this may impact my employability.'*

### YLAL calls for:

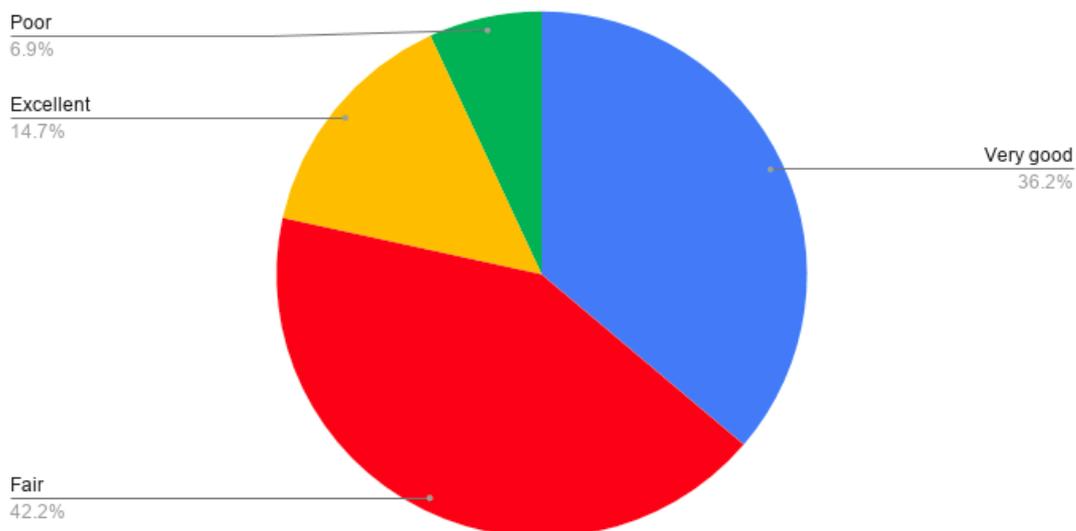
- an understanding approach and clear communication from Home Office for students with uncertain immigration status.

### YLAL calls on all course providers to:

- be mindful of the impact students' straitened circumstances have on their finances and wellbeing, and implement policies and support packages to ameliorate the effects of this;
- provide students with guidance and support to enable them to maximise their productivity and achieve their educational aims during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- be better aware of the needs and caring responsibilities of individual students, the impact of their personal circumstances on their studies and be flexible in accommodating those needs. Individual discussions should take place with each student;
- consider the ways in which students can be supported to achieve their full potential and manage their studies whilst understanding the difficulties they may face in maintaining their individual health and wellbeing; and
- explore and/or generate remote work experience placements to enhance students' employability during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 5. Quality of measures put in place to adapt to COVID-19

How would you describe measures put in place by your university or course provider to adapt to the COVID-19 restrictions?



Nearly half of respondents felt that the measures their university or course provider had put in place to adapt to COVID-19 was 'fair', with 32.1% ranking them 'very good' and 13.9% ranking them 'excellent'.

YLAL recognises that educational establishments have had to implement far-reaching changes to the way they teach and examine their students at extremely short notice. YLAL does not underestimate the challenge that educational establishments have faced in doing this and respondents expressed gratitude for this having happened. However, YLAL has concerns about the disruption which has been caused through poor communication and planning.

## **Adaptation to Online Learning Platforms**

Many responses praised their universities for moving classes online in a short period of time. Some universities closed their buildings and cancelled face-to-face teaching before government guidance was issued which allowed students time to adjust and return to their families. Responses emphasise that universities have made good use of online learning platforms such as Blackboard, Panopto and Microsoft Teams. In addition, responses noted the fact that librarians have uploaded material online and increased access to e-books.

One respondent stated, *'I think our lecturers have been absolutely fantastic, and have worked very hard to adapt our lectures and seminars to online workshops, which are working well.'*

Responses also highlighted the importance of accessing services which help students to enhance their CVs and look for job opportunities.

## **Remote Exams**

Universities were praised for adapting the format of exams so they could take place as online assessments. One respondent reported that their exams were scheduled to be one week after lockdown commenced and the university was able to make provision for the exams to be undertaken remotely. Enabling exams to be undertaken at the time originally scheduled means that students are not disadvantaged regarding future career plans.

Respondents also praised the relaxing of rules around mitigating circumstances and deferrals. One respondent noted,

*'This has massively reduced my stress around my studies and enabled me to focus 100% on my NHS role as a front line nurse without having to worry about the impact on my exams.'*

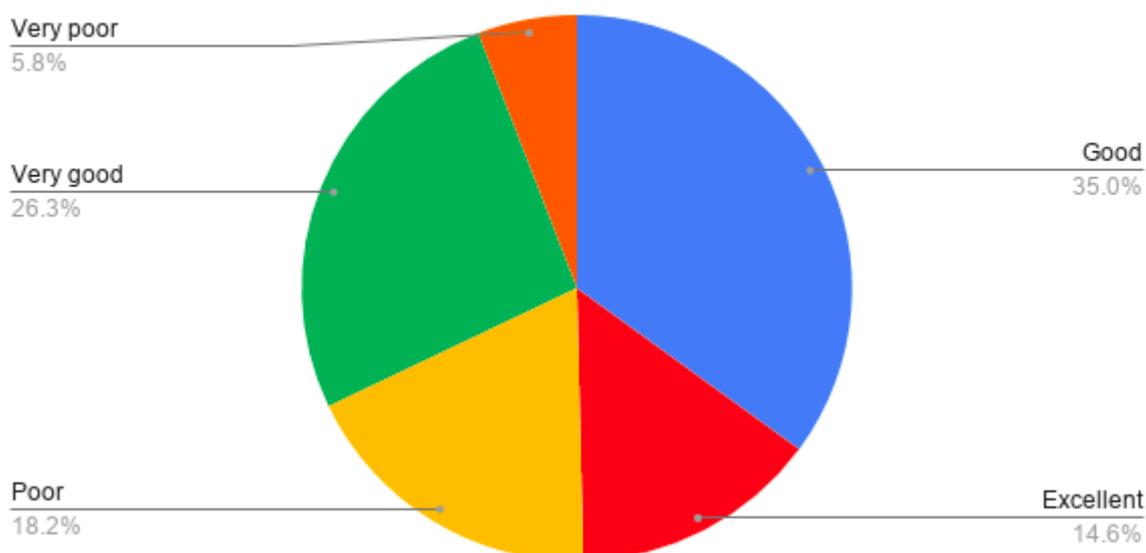
With regard to legal professional exams, universities have implemented appropriate measures to allow advocacy assessments and other university administered assessments to be done remotely. One response stated that their university had negotiated alternative assessments with the Solicitors Regulation Authority so that all exams could go ahead on the dates planned from home.

## **Safety Net Provision**

Some universities have adopted the 'safety net' provision or no-detriment policy which means that final grades will not decrease from the average a student has attained during the year. As a result if performance in exams is negatively affected by COVID-19 students' final results will not be lower than their average.

## Communication

How would you rate the quality of communication between your university/course provider and students?



It is reassuring to see that nearly 76% of respondents felt that communication between course providers and students had been 'good', 'very good' or 'excellent'.

Many of the responses emphasised the importance of students feeling listened to by their universities. Students praised staff who had been supportive and responded to their emails quickly. In particular, one respondent stated that their university held a session in which the students were able to voice any concerns they had.

Responses also highlighted that consistent communication and regular updates from their universities was useful. One respondent noted that emails from their university which expressed the hope that their students were safe was *'very comforting to hear'*.

However, a number of respondents expressed a clear wish for clarity and timely communication, especially in respect of universities' plans for their upcoming examinations.

One respondent commented, *'Too often we receive multiple emails with the same information or many emails with information that is not relevant to the current situation.'*

Another responded, *'The communication could have been clearer and more concise. Mass emails are sent out across LLB and LPC courses despite fundamentally conflicting information being supplied to each course.'*

Several respondents commented that they felt that they felt unsupported by their university or course provider and that, in the absence of clear and prompt communication, rumours abounded: *'students spent weeks fretting and stressing each other out about imminent exams'*; *'Different sources said different things about whether they'd go ahead and this created more anxiety.'*

One student said that they had found out their exams were cancelled from students at another provider before they were informed by their own provider, *'which caused a bit of uncertainty and anxiety amongst the cohort'*.

One part-time student and full-time paralegal said, *'They did not release exam information until this week. The exams are in one month, and the dates of them have changed. This was problematic for me, as I have to get study leave cleared by my team weeks in advance, so this has caused me a lot of anxiety.'*

Many respondents commented that their university or course provider had failed to listen to their concerns, and that this had led to the implementation of changes which were not in students' interests.

For example, one respondent stated, *'They could have consulted students more about how they wanted exams to happen. A lot of people are not happy with the final arrangements.'*

Another said, *'One thing my uni could have done was listened to students. I am the president of our student association. They don't listen to us at all.'*

Many respondents craved some recognition that home learning is vastly different from learning in a formal setting and that some students would take time to adapt to this. Others would struggle to adapt due to caring responsibilities; one respondent commented that *'no thought'* had been given to individuals like this.

One respondent wished for *'more understanding of what we as students are trying to deal with - trying to finish a very stressful course during a period of great anxiety and fear'*.

### YLAL calls on universities and legal education providers to:

- listen to their students proactively and ensure greater transparency and clearer lines of communication.

## 6. What could course providers do to improve the smooth running of academic programmes during COVID-19?

Drawing on some of the issues they had experienced, respondents suggested a number of improvements. These included:

- smaller class sizes to facilitate greater student engagement;
- longer revision periods between exams; and
- more interactive learning resources.

## Facilitating interaction with tutors and peers

As previously mentioned, one of the most significant aspects of COVID-19 for students is the loss of some of the interactive aspects of the educational experience, like sharing ideas with fellow students and asking questions of lecturers.

As one respondent noted, *'It would have been nice to have some organised meetings with tutors on video call such as Zoom. They just released the answers to set tutorial questions and removed the important aspect of discussion.'*

Another respondent stated,

*'We now watch recorded workshops in our own time and complete what would have been group tasks by ourselves. These are followed by a live Q&A session. I feel with the technology available we would actually be able to conduct the workshops live using collaborate, zoom, teams, etc. And this would be more interactive and a better learning experience.'*

One respondent suggested that universities offer online Q&A sessions or allow students to speak with individual tutors over the phone. However, respondents acknowledged that tutors' own individual circumstances may make this difficult.

One respondent remarked that, *'Some lecturers have gone to great lengths to make themselves available, others have been silent. Obviously there could be a whole range of understandable reasons for this, but it would be appreciated if students could be kept informed and alternatives offered.'*

## Reducing social isolation

More than one respondent observed that classes had been set up without reference to the normal social cues which students would expect in a classroom setting.

One respondent said, *'The first class should have been video so that everyone could meet. My tutors do not know who I am and I feel like I have no real contact with any of them nor my peers. It is very isolating.'*

This seems like a straightforward issue to correct if tutors approach teaching online classes in the same way they would a face-to-face class. Broader than this, education providers should be conscious of the fact that their students are missing out on many of the usual opportunities for social interaction that they would usually have. Arrangements should be made to facilitate this remotely where possible, for example through break-out sessions to enable group work.

## Adapting learning resources

Respondents recognised that a virtual course is very different from one which is held in person.

One respondent commented that course providers should, *'provide... work which is more adaptable to working at home. Setting reading is not enough. Engage with us so we can engage with the topic.'*

Interactive resources are a key aspect of this and YLAL urges universities to embrace creative solutions to delivering teaching during this time so that students do not lose out.

#### YLAL calls on all course providers to:

- consider adopting smaller class sizes to facilitate greater student engagement;
- make provision for longer revision periods between exams;
- continue to generate interactive learning resources;
- facilitate effective communication between students and their tutors, monitoring consistency among staff members, to ensure that students feel 'known';
- make arrangements to facilitate social interaction remotely where possible so that students do not lose out on much needed peer support; and
- embrace creative solutions to teaching delivery during and following the Coronavirus pandemic.

## 7. The impact of COVID-19 on social mobility

YLAL are deeply concerned about the impact that COVID-19 will have on the professional futures of our student members. The survey respondents highlighted the legitimate concerns they hold about their intended legal careers.

For those respondents who are still early on in their academic careers, the concern that their performance has been impacted by COVID-19 and they will not be able to achieve their anticipated grades due to the disruption to their studies was one held by many.

With the cancellation of mandatory qualifying sessions for the Bar and final grades being released much later than anticipated, many prospective barristers have had their pupillage plans set back.

One respondent commented that they were now unsure as to whether they would take up their position on the BPTC as they were concerned as to the adequacy of *'the alternative type of education'* (i.e. online teaching) that they were receiving and its suitability for teaching practical skills such as advocacy.

Others expressed concern about the financial viability of undertaking further education in the face of substantial course fees and poor employment prospects.

Many respondents noted that they have had to reevaluate their plans to train and qualify as lawyers and face up to the reality that the process will take them longer than it might have otherwise.

Some respondents took a somewhat sanguine view, noting that COVID-19 had allowed them time for reflection, reading and research about their intended career and area of specialism. According to one respondent:

*'The anticipated economic downturn impacts my decision to go on to study for the bar directly after this degree or not. As a self-funded student without parental support, it is unlikely I will be able to proceed straight to the BPTC.'*

Firms and chambers have curtailed or postponed their recruitment schemes, and in future the number of entry level positions on offer to our members will be significantly reduced.

As one respondent noted, *'I think it's fairly likely that trainee places are going to be much more hard to come by in the next few years.'*

YLAL is concerned that those without independent means will lose out, as they will be unable to undertake unpaid work experience opportunities which are sadly the gateway to many entry legal positions.

Our 2018 social mobility report 'Social Mobility in a Time of Austerity'<sup>1</sup> found that 13.5% of respondents considered unpaid work experience as the most significant barrier to the profession.

Respondents to this survey noted that they will need to take a 'creative' approach to ensuring that they get the relevant experience they need to apply for pupillage/training contracts due to the cancellation of mini pupillages and summer work placements.

The situation has forced a reality check for respondents. One respondent noted that it had caused them to *'view... my plans differently and perhaps reevaluate the stability of where I want to end up. For example, there are strengths to being part of a corporation and strengths to working for yourself that have been totally exposed by the outbreak'*.

The financial insecurity which faces self-employed legal aid barristers presents a very worrying prospect and is a reason some respondents commented that they are no longer interested in a career at the Bar. Several respondents stated that they were considering a career change and looking at graduate schemes and research positions instead of contemplating life in practice.

It was heartening to witness the resilience of our student members in the face of such an uncertain future. Many expressed a continued commitment to the same career path, albeit with the proviso that they will have to overcome significant difficulties to get to where they want to be in an already highly competitive field. Several commented that the situation had reaffirmed their commitment to becoming lawyers so that they can provide support and assistance to the most vulnerable in society.

Respondents variously described the situation produced by COVID-19 as, *'just another hurdle to jump through'* and *'a harder mountain to climb (when it was already a very steep slope)'*.

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<sup>1</sup> *Young Legal Aid Lawyers: Social Mobility in a Time of Austerity*, 2018  
<http://www.younglegalaidlawyers.org/socialmobilityreport2018>

Despite everything, we remain encouraged by the hopeful and optimistic outlook of YLAL members in the face of the manifest uncertainties presented by COVID-19. This view is neatly summed up in the following comment:

*'I am committed to qualifying as a solicitor. Covid-19 has been an example of a situation where you are required to adapt and make the best out of a bad situation, not give up on your goals.'*

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