

Law Students Reflect on Summer Clerkship Opportunity

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Over the past three months, Cooney Lees Morgan has welcomed four students from Waikato and Victoria universities into our practice

teams.

They've been mentored by our senior staff and given the opportunity to work directly with clients to extend their knowledge and skills, and prepare for life after graduation.
As they now head back to law school to complete their studies, we asked them to share their summer clerkship experiences and what insights they've gained.

Nellie McKegg (Victoria University)

Why did you choose to apply for a summer clerkship at Cooney Lees Morgan?

Firstly, they had a great website. This told me straight away that they were a modern and forward-thinking company with their finger on the pulse and who paid attention to detail. But what truly encouraged me to apply was the firm's values. I loved that it was a firm comprised mostly of women, and that it was proud to have acquired key stamps of inclusivity such as the Rainbow Tick. It was a priority for me to apply to a firm that would be nurturing and that had a friendly and hard-working culture. In my interview, I took the risk of disclosing my neurodivergence and was met with nothing but support. Before I had even been offered a place, they had exceeded my expectations.

What was the biggest thing you learned?

It may be shocking, but the biggest thing I learned was what lawyers actually do. At university you learn The Law, and you spend a lot of time reading cases, researching, and critiquing gaps and inconsistencies. While lawyers certainly do some of that, there is a lot more to practising. So it was really interesting to be in amongst it and learn what other skills it takes to be a lawyer.

Has this helped shape your future career plans?

I was assigned to the family law team which terrified me. I am quite a sensitive soul and was worried I would find the content upsetting. What I have learned, however, is the flipside to that means that it is really interesting. I also was given the exciting opportunity to observe a court case which was truly inspiring. I have beyond enjoyed myself, and discovered a love

for litigation and a field of law I had previously completely roped off for myself.

What have you enjoyed most about your time at the firm?

Aside from the stability, the routine, the lovely area and the amazing people, I am leaving with the feeling of being valued – something I didn't expect as a clerk. I was always given work that made me think. I was constantly drafting documents for clients, attending client meetings, and even helping to write the cross examination questions for a court case. I genuinely felt an investment in me and my learning with opportunities to handle important tasks and detailed and constructive feedback.

Benjamin Pilmore-Evans (Waikato University)

How did you find the transition from university to the workplace?

Stepping into unfamiliar territory comes with lots of emotions. But upon walking through the door, I knew it was going to be a great experience.

There was a mental transition from this idea that all law firms are 8am-8pm and law clerks are there to get slammed with work. But the culture here is exactly what they advertise – a family-focused, 8:30am-5pm team who help each other out where and when they can.

The biggest transition was the systems and getting used to them. Being totally new to the legal sector, we asked a lot of questions to learn how to use the systems better. But with a genuinely warm team, everything was answered as needed.

What did you value most about the firm's culture?

The values were exactly what was advertised. The firm is fun, involved with the community, and wants to support and develop people. The sheer quality of the work people do around this firm speaks to the nature of the leadership and the passion for their work. I will genuinely miss being able to learn from the team at CLM. It was the people who made this experience so special for me.

What was the biggest thing you learned?

One of the senior associates said being a lawyer is more often about commonsense, conflict prevention and conflict resolution. While we deal with statutes, judgments and case law, ultimately we want to do right by our clients so we must think about things through a practical lens.

The other thing I learnt, is if you are not sure of something, ask. Sometimes when you're new to an environment, it's best to just ask and use that learning to carry it through for next time.

Has this helped shape your future career plans?

Absolutely. This experience has highlighted just how much of the legal sector intersects with each other. Land can intersect with the RMA and relate to trusts, corporate buildings, sale and purchases, leases etc. Each of these different areas mean we often take guidance from other specialties which helps us become better legal professionals.

As a geography student in my BA, I love getting to understand how land is used and would like to continue down this path. I'm also open to ideas outside of the property and development area.

Christopher Maine (Waikato University)

Why did you choose to apply for a summer clerkship at Cooney Lees Morgan?

I grew up in Tauranga and chose Cooneys over other law firms in the Bay because of its values. I didn't want to be in a firm where there were a dozen clerks and I was just a number. I wanted to be in a firm that valued its people and in an environment where I could learn and challenge myself.

Additionally, I was attracted to this programme because you don't move practice areas over the duration of the clerkship. I felt that staying in a single practice area would be more beneficial as it would enable better connections to be made and deeper knowledge to be gained.

How did you find the transition from university to the workplace?

I really enjoyed having more separation between being ‘on’ the clock and ‘off’ compared to university. I also appreciated the ability to apply my skills to real life matters. At uni everything is hypothetical to test what you have been taught and prove how much information you have absorbed each semester. In the workplace, your skills are tested for the purpose of helping the client and resolving a real world issue or request. Even as a summer clerk I have been able to make a difference to real matters and people which has been great.

What did you value the most about the firm’s culture?

The team here at Cooneys have created a learning environment where you are pushed to put your best foot forward and attempt new tasks and challenges, but also where you are encouraged to ask questions. The genuine investment in my learning and progression as a developing young lawyer has been phenomenal. There have been countless times where my team have gone out of their way to teach me valuable skills and knowledge where it would have been faster for them to execute the task themselves. This environment meant I looked forward to coming to work each day.

What was the biggest thing you learned?

Teamwork makes the dream work. Before my clerkship I thought of the different practice areas as entirely separate, with barely any intersection. However, I have learned the work is client-centric so to accommodate the clients’ needs in the best way, working together between practice areas is essential. Having strong relationships and clear lines of communication between teams is critical, and I have seen this implemented well at Cooneys.

Working at Cooneys has shown me that first class legal services can be offered without sacrificing life, and that balance is achievable in the profession. It has highlighted to me that working for a top quality, mid-size firm is where I would like my career to progress.

Vanessa Williams (Victoria University)

How did you find the transition from university to the workplace?

Something that I’ve enjoyed is being able to clock off at 5pm and actually go home without thinking about work. This is a testament to the culture at Cooneys – they care about their

employees' wellbeing and provide a work life balance. We work hard, but there isn't a culture of working overtime on a daily basis. For me, this is very different to my schedule while I'm studying. Most days I'll be at the library late, or work, or I'll even go back to the library after dinner to try and stay on top of things. I think Cooneys is very aware of the impact that burnout can have on staff and the business, so they try and mitigate that where possible.

What was the biggest thing you learned?

My research and writing skills have improved significantly. There are so many little tricks and shortcuts that I've never been taught at uni. Having to write in a completely different style for website articles and court documents, compared to uni assignments, has expanded my skillset.

Working in a law firm has also drawn my attention to the 'why' behind the law. When you understand how it is going to affect your client in their day-to-day life, it allows you to come to a practical solution much faster because you know exactly what you are looking for. It's not just words on a page.

Has this helped shape your future career plans?

I'm really glad I've been able to work in the litigation team as a summer clerk. This is an area that I am really interested in because of the variety of work that you do. I think Cooney's litigation team is unique in the fact that I was able to do both civil litigation and local government/RMA work. So I've been able to get a feel for quite a few different areas. Thanks to Cooneys, litigation will definitely be one of my top choices once I graduate.

What have you enjoyed most about your time at the firm?

Definitely the people. I feel like I've made some really amazing friends. I love how so many of them have gone from being mentors and trainers to genuine friends. Cooneys has a great bunch of people.

I've made some great memories, had so much fun and learned so much along the way. I really enjoyed being able to attend many social events that have allowed me to connect with people and have a good time. Getting to be part of the firm has been amazing and I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity.