

What do I call people?

This confuses some new students. Getting into the culture of a law school is a useful thing.

Throwing off childish things

The one clear rule is that should never, under any circumstances call university academics “Sir” or “Miss”.¹ Adults do not call one another “Sir/Miss” unless they are in the Army, the Police, or in an esoteric sexual relationship.

Law school is not school. Academics are not schoolteachers; they should not be called “Sir” or “Miss”. It is one of the gateways involved in growing up that you have to go through the stage of talking to grown-ups as people, not grown-ups. (And not using the word “grown-up” probably ought to be another rule.)

A university law school is a community of scholars. It is not possible to talk about the very adult, precious and important debates which are discussed in university law schools unless students and academics talk to one another as adults. Now respect is fine, politeness is a must, healthy debate and thought is essential. (All of those things should cut both ways in law schools: student to academic, and academic to student.) Using “Sir” and “Miss” is the antithesis of the right sort of culture.

What do all the titles mean?

There is a hierarchy in universities: the titles are important to the academics. You will be probably able to find out what level people are at by looking at your own law school’s web-site. You should not lapse into calling everyone “professor” like Americans have a habit of doing, nor into assuming that anyone old is a “professor”.

There a distinction between permanent staff, fixed term contract staff, and temporary staff. Permanent staff have full-time jobs on the faculty and will be required to publish research in most law schools. It is hugely competitive getting jobs in universities in any department (law or otherwise): typically, permanent jobs are based on the individual’s published research; although a few permanent posts are teaching-only in some law schools. Consequently, for younger academics, a career starts by acquiring some part-time teaching and then graduating up the scale to winning a fixed-term contract position for teaching (this was how I started). The reason is that it is very difficult to get a job without some published research or being in the course of PhD research, and it is difficult to get research published: so, there is quite a vicious circle there. Law schools typically need a large number of students because the government pays universities much less

¹ Try to avoid calling male academics “Miss” and female academics “Sir”: that causes additional complications.

money per student than was the case twenty years ago (and tuition fees have not helped that position, you might be surprised to learn). Hence the need for fixed term contract academics: in budgeting terms, there is no long-term commitment for the university to pay a salary for a person on a fixed-term contract: that is legendarily stressful for the teacher in that position. This is also the reason for employing so many part-time teachers: it helps to stretch a small number of teachers across a large number of students: it is the usual way in US law schools to have the permanent academics lecturing and then teaching assistants running seminars.

Academics who have a PhD degree – having written a 100,000 word dissertation over a minimum three years, and having had it examined in writing and orally – are the only ones who are called “Dr”. That someone is “Dr” does not tell you anything about their seniority: it is only about them having earned a PhD.²

There are four tiers of permanent academics in traditional universities, starting at the bottom: Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Reader, Professor. Promotion from Lecturer to Senior Lecturer is usually³ based either on length of service (and one would hope teaching quality) or on research quality. Promotion from Senior Lecturer to Reader, and from Reader to Professor is then based on the quality of the applicant’s research alone. It is only people who have been appointed Professor who are entitled to be called “Professor”: but it is not based on age nor long service. Promotion from Reader to Professor usually involves the university taking three secret references from experts in the applicant’s field, as well as three references from people nominated by the applicant. It is a rigorous process.

What do I call individual academics?

It really is a matter for the individual academic and you. Some academics are happy to be called by their first names (they are usually the young, friendly ones). Other people might be a bit more prickly about you using their first names. If you’re really not sure: ask them.

But only call Professors “Professor”. Do not call someone who is a professor or who has a PhD “Mr” or “Mrs” because it will sound like an insult, as though you have demoted them. And never, ever call anyone “Sir” or “Miss”.

² PhD’s are much more common in law now than they used to be, in part because they are often such an important part of getting a permanent job at a university in the UK because they prove the applicant’s research credentials.

³ Different universities have slightly different requirements.