

## ORAL CONCOURS 2014

### ANGLAIS - LVI

#### The price of success

Some American law schools are paying many of their graduates' salaries.

Each year when *U.S. News*, an American publisher, releases its league table of law schools, potential students seize on it and the universities decry it for oversimplifying a personal and unquantifiable decision. But the schools can ill afford to ignore it, since not just applicants but donors and even credit-rating agencies pay close attention to the scores.

Among the ranking's most important components is the share of graduates who find jobs. The 2014 table, announced on March 11th, shows that the University of Virginia (UVA) and George Washington University (GW) do especially well on this. Although UVA's law students are only in ninth place for their scores in standard admission tests, 97.5% of the class of 2012 had a job on graduating—the best mark in the country. At GW the discrepancy was even more striking: its 85% graduate-employment rate ranked ninth, whereas its admission-test scores were 21st.

However, the two schools' performance is not as stellar as it seems. A close look at the online employment database of the American Bar Association reveals that GW and UVA are among the leaders in a striking trend: law schools paying the salaries of their alumni when they go to work in legal firms, non-profits or the government. GW paid the starting salaries of a whopping 22% of its 2012 graduates; at 15%, UVA was not far behind.

Some law schools have long given aid to a few alumni who forsake high-paying corporate firms to pursue public-interest law. But since the 2008-09 recession, entry-level jobs at big firms have been scarce. This has led to a big expansion of "bridge to practice" schemes, in which the schools pay graduates a stipend to do a work placement. In a recent survey by the National Association for Law Placement (NALP), 45 of the 94 schools that responded now run such programmes. Half of them began in 2009 or 2010, but UVA's has run since 2007. It now pays \$31,500 for graduates to work in public service for a year. Arizona State University plans to set up a non-profit law firm, modelled on teaching hospitals, that will hire 30 recent graduates to provide legal services to lower-income clients.

With demand for newly minted lawyers down by around 30%, the schemes spare the alumni from having an awkward gap on their CV, and give them valuable work experience and contacts. Their cash-strapped temporary employers, meanwhile, get talented staff they can put to socially useful ends. Dennis Corkery, a GW graduate, got \$525 a week from his *alma mater* to work on job-discrimination cases at the Washington Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, a non-profit. The organisation started topping up his wages from the university after four months, and gave him a full salary after 11. Mr Corkery sees the scheme as a good way to give young lawyers an "apprenticeship".

But so long as graduates put on these schemes are lumped in with those who found genuine paid work at law firms, the schools will in effect be buying themselves precious *U.S. News* ranking spots for a few million dollars a year. And applicants to law school who are considering taking on a six-figure debt will get a misleading picture of the job market. The programmes rarely last more than a year, and often pay a pittance. GW, which spends 4% of its budget on these wages, tried to cut pay rates in 2012 from \$15 an hour to \$10 before reversing itself after an uproar. Moreover, their success in getting graduates into genuine jobs is spotty: the NALP survey found that only 24% of participants from the class of 2012 had been hired by their employers or in related fields by the following February. GW and UVA say their success rate is far higher than this.

Robert Morse of *U.S. News* says it would consider excluding or reducing the weight of school-funded jobs if it could somehow distinguish which ones are genuinely sought-after placements with the prospect of a proper job. The risk is that, like pre-bail-out carmakers dumping surplus vehicles on their dealers, the law schools get used to paying legal firms to soak up their excess graduates. The real test of the schools' motivations will be whether they continue to run such programmes if and when it no longer bumps them up the rankings.