

Court Observation and Offender Support experience at Aberystwyth Justice Centre – a guide for students

The Careers Service at Aberystwyth University has been working in partnership with the Aberystwyth Justice Centre for a number of years to provide court observation and offender support experience to Aberystwyth University students. This opportunity is currently open to students at any level in the Departments of Psychology, Law & Criminology and Education.

The scheme was first introduced in 2010, by the HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS), when it was known as the 'Problem Solver Initiative'. For this reason, you are still likely to hear the term 'Problem Solver' being used. However, the PSI has since ceased in many areas, but we are delighted that it has continued in Aberystwyth under the present arrangements.

These are unpaid work experience opportunities.

More about the role

Between 6 and 10 students are offered a place on the Scheme each academic year; they attend the Court in pairs on a rota basis, on Wednesdays when plea and sentencing sessions are held.

The rota is devised to enable each student to be able to attend the Court on at least 3, but hopefully more, occasions – attendance dates are in term-time only with the final date being in May, the week before Summer term exams start. Students must always attend the Court in pairs.

Students will need to demonstrate full commitment to the scheme during the recruitment process. The ability to be self-managing and communicate effectively with the Careers Service team and fellow participants on the scheme is also essential, for example, when attendance as per the rota is not possible and cover needs to be arranged. Students often create a Facebook or WhatsApp group to stay in touch with each other, share experiences and tips, and to make alternative arrangements amongst themselves if attendance needs to be cancelled or swapped.

Students should arrive at the Court on their designated day(s) at 9.00am promptly, and plan to stay all day until 5.00pm, although Court sessions may end before then.

During court sessions, the students sit with Court staff and other professionals working in the criminal justice system, such as Probation Officers, where they can observe court etiquette, all aspects of court proceedings, and different professionals, including solicitors, carrying out their role in practice. This presents a great opportunity to network and make good contacts, and develop additional opportunities.

Students should note however that they are independent of the Court and do not take part in legal proceedings or the formal work of the Court; they should interact with offenders only when directed to do so by the Magistrate or other member of Court staff.

Where appropriate, the Magistrate will refer the defendant to the student for the key purpose of assisting the defendant to identify their support needs and to provide information on local services that can help them. This 1:1 work takes place once the defendant has left the Court, before leaving the Justice Centre. A resource file updated and used by all students when attending the Court is kept at the Court.

Applicants will therefore need to be confident in their ability to:

- approach defendants and build rapport quickly
- apply effective listening skills
- deal with potentially challenging situations and information with sensitivity and confidentiality
- use research skills and initiative to gain knowledge of local support provision
- liaise with key contacts within local support organisations for the benefit of defendants

Students should note that opportunities to support offenders 1:1 in this way are not guaranteed each time – the type of defendant and business of the Court in Aberystwyth have changed in recent years following new initiatives in the criminal justice system, resulting in fewer opportunities for Magistrates to refer defendants to the ‘Problem Solvers’.

However, there may be additional opportunities to support offenders 1:1 in the reception area, prior to the start of the Court session, where they are required to complete a ‘means’ form on arrival if they have not already done so. This is a ‘Statement of assets and other financial circumstances’ and is required to show the Court the defendant’s means to pay any fines. If the defendant has no representation with them, Court staff may call upon one of the two students in attendance to help the offender to complete the form.

Recruitment & joining process

1. Eligible students are sent an email from careers@aber.ac.uk around late September/early October to advise that applications are open, and to confirm all relevant dates. Their academic department might also draw their attention to this opportunity in separate communications.
2. An information session* is run by Careers Service representatives on the Penglais campus, well before the application closing date, to answer any questions about the scheme and to give face-to-face support with making an application. Past participants are also invited to attend.
3. Application is made by submitting a CV and covering letter to careers@aber.ac.uk by the closing date*.
4. Shortlisted candidates are invited to attend a 20-minute interview* at the Aberystwyth Justice Centre – the interview panel is made up of Careers Service representatives and a Magistrate.
5. Successful candidates are asked to attend a ½ day scheme induction* at the Aberystwyth Justice Centre, which usually takes place the week before the first Court session on the rota. Past participants and representatives from local support agencies are also invited to attend. Permission to attend will need to be sought if the student has academic commitments at the same time.

** The date, time and venue for these activities will have been provided in the notification email to students sent from careers@aber.ac.uk (point 1 above) and are also available on the Careers Service’s online portal, ABERcareers.*

During the induction session, the students confirmed as taking part in the scheme are briefed on Court etiquette and given a tour of the Court. In addition, the rota will be discussed and confirmed. A group task will also be issued, to ensure the resource file is up-to-date and that each student has access to information on the relevant local support services that are available to defendants.

Application tips

Students are selected to take part in this opportunity via a competitive process involving shortlisting and interview. There is usually high demand for these opportunities so it's essential that the application is of high quality.

1. Attend the information session

Any student considering making an application to the scheme or who simply wants to find out more is advised to attend this session. Where possible, students who have taken part in the scheme before will be present and are a valuable source of advice and information.

2. Do your research

Think about what a career in the criminal justice system will be like – there is a huge variety of roles available in this sector, from solicitor to prison officer, education coordinator to mental health adviser.

Look at the 'what can I do with my degree?' pages on the Prospects [website](#) and check out the subject specific information on the Careers Service's [website](#).

Organisations such as the [Crown Prosecution Service](#) and the [Ministry of Justice](#) also provide a wealth of careers information as do support services such as the [Citizens Advice Bureau](#).

Discuss your ideas with your tutor, Careers Consultant or other staff in the [Careers Service](#) (you can drop-in for advice, or make an appointment).

*It's also **strongly recommended** that you visit the Aberystwyth Justice Centre on any weekday and observe the court from the public area; this will help confirm your interest in working in this kind of environment and will also support any application you make to this and other related opportunities. Court sessions can continue into the late afternoon but it's best to attend in the morning.*

3. Consider what the selectors are looking for and tailor your application

The team responsible for reviewing the applications and shortlisting for interview will be keen to see that you've done your research and have a clear rationale for applying to this specific and individual opportunity. You'll also need to show that you understand the role and the skills and attributes it requires, and that you can provide evidence of how and where you have developed and used these relevant skills to date.

They'll also be looking for commitment, enthusiasm and a genuine interest in careers related to your degree studies and this area of work. Emphasising your reasons for applying and providing an explanation of how undertaking this opportunity will contribute to your career ideas and plans will also strengthen your application.

4. Take your time and create a tailored, error-free application

To help you to write the best possible application, please refer to the [helpful leaflets](#) produced by the Careers Service on writing a CV and covering letter. You're also strongly advised to seek help and support with your application from the Careers Service, to ensure it's as good as it can be. This is especially important if you didn't attend the information session.

You can drop in to the Careers Service, Students' Union building, Penglais, for help with your draft application on the following days/times:

- Monday-Thursday: 10.30am-1.00pm & 2.00pm-4.30pm
- Friday: 10.30am-1.00pm & 2.00pm-4.00pm

Or you can meet your Careers Consultant at one of the drop-in sessions within your academic department. Telephone 01970 622378 if you're not sure when these are held.

Please also follow the advice below:

- Address your covering letter to: Aberystwyth Justice Centre, c/o Aberystwyth University Careers Service, Penglais Campus, Aberystwyth SY23 3DX. Use Dear Sir/Madam and Yours faithfully.
- Be succinct! Your covering letter should preferably be 1 page of A4 long but certainly no more than 2; your CV should be no more than 2 pages of A4 long.
- Remember to include the course you're currently studying, and the year you're in now, in the Education section of your CV, i.e. make sure the CV is completely up-to-date.
- Please create and send your application as .doc (Microsoft Word), not .pdf or other format.
- Please give your document(s) a name that identifies it as your application when saved into a folder of all applications, for example, 'Smith, Alex CV' and 'Smith, Alex CL', i.e. don't just call it 'CV'. You're welcome to submit the covering letter and CV as one document, or separate documents.

5. Check your application before submission

Check and double-check format, spelling and grammar. Make sure there are no mistakes or omissions and that page breaks don't cut off sentences or sections.

Using colour, tints and different margins can look great on screen, but ensure no information is lost when the document is printed in black & white.

Again, the Careers Service would be happy to make a final check of your application before submission.

Thank you for reading.