

My experience participating in the IAG exchange program

Written by Elizabeth Moran

Introduction

[Integrated Advisory Group International \(IAG\)](#) is an association of independent professional companies from around the world. The Pacific Legal Network is a member of IAG, which allows us access to professional advisors from countries all over the world.

Earlier this year, I was fortunate enough to participate in IAG's relaunch of its exchange program. My exchange partner was [Clare Hedges](#), an immigration lawyer from [Birketts, LLP](#). Destination? **Cambridge, United Kingdom**. I could hardly contain my excitement at the prospect of my first trip to the UK.

So what did I get up to?



Clare arrived in Sydney in late March (just as our Sydney weather went from scorching to bearable), and I had the benefit of meeting and befriending her during her time with PLN in Sydney. During her short stay in our office Clare impressed the team with her kindness, generosity and sincerity.

I arrived in Cambridge on the morning of my birthday. True to form, Clare was a fantastic host, and, despite being bleary-eyed and jetlagged, I had a wonderful birthday seeing the sights and beautiful scenery of Cambridge.

Over the course of the next two and a half weeks I was based in the Cambridge office of Birketts. I was quickly exposed to a different environment, as well as different teaching styles and methods of work. I also participated in some training and seminars with their team, which was a valuable learning experience. Given the similarities between the legal systems of Australia and the UK, as well as the cross-border nature of transactional corporate law, I had assumed that much of how we do business in Australia was reflected in the UK. My time at Birketts taught me that this is not always the case – the TUPE regulations, for instance, were a completely foreign concept to me. I am immensely grateful to everyone in the team for providing me with some valuable insight on the art of the deal in the UK.

During my exchange I clocked visits to all of the other Birketts offices in Chelmsford, Norwich and Ipswich. I thoroughly enjoyed my visits to the Birketts offices, it was great to meet the teams and find out more about the diversity of Birketts' practice areas. I was also fortunate enough to tag along with one of the litigation lawyers to an application being heard at the High Court. I took the opportunity to explore the Royal Courts of Justice and the Old Bailey, where I sat in on some interesting cases, which was a fantastic experience (that only a lawyer would find fascinating!).



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As it was my first visit to the UK I made sure I got out and explored! We visited a food and drink festival at the Isle of Ely where we explored the historic Ely Cathedral. We also went to see Holkham beach in the Norfolk Coast – for someone used to Australian beaches I was struck by how a beach can be breathtaking for more reasons than one... it was painfully cold. Clare is an ardent Norwich supporter, so she took me to see Norwich play in their final game of the season. I certainly saw a different side to Clare – it would best be described as passionate, and at worst, diehard.

My exchange program culminated with the IAG conference in Cambridge. Some of the highlights were the rousing talk from Birketts' partner Henry Adams on his expedition to the South Pole, gin-tasting over spectacular views of Cambridge at the Varsity Hotel, a punting trip of the college backs, and the Gala Dinner at Queen's College at Cambridge University. It was such a fantastic end to an amazing visit to Cambridge.



What about talent retention?

As part of our exchange, I was encouraged to find out more about the challenges faced by Birketts in terms of retaining talent (in particular female talent) and report back on what Birketts have been doing to address the challenges and barriers that prevent women from rising to leadership positions and executive roles.

In Australia, women are entering the legal profession in significantly greater numbers than men. My peers at university were predominately women. At PLN we have an overwhelming majority of women across not just the Sydney office but across the PLN offices in the Pacific Islands as well. As I discovered, the UK is experiencing a similar trend. Many assume, therefore, that female leadership and representation at an executive level will surely increase over time as a result. However, despite this, there remains a significant disconnect between these figures and the actual prospect of women reaching leadership positions in their places of work. While many reasons can be attributed to this, ultimately women often face an entrenched (and often unconscious) bias which hinders their professional advancement and progression to the upper echelons of their organisations. Outdated approaches to recruitment, mentoring and professional development coupled with a lack of flexibility often enhances a sense of disillusionment with the traditional law firm model.

As I discovered, Birketts have taken active steps to address these issues, improve its gender diversity and attract and retain female talent. It has introduced various mentoring programs and leadership training. It has also launched a diversity programme to help promote, foster and maintain diversity and equality across Birketts. These kinds of initiatives promote the thinking that developing and encouraging female talent should no longer be seen as just a "woman's issue", but rather a "business issue".

What were the benefits of the exchange program?

The IAG exchange program promotes the creation of a lasting, global network of peers at all career levels. It allows greater representation from member firms to the network, which means that we are able to more fully take advantage of all that the IAG network has to offer.

During my exchange I gained a far greater understanding of the UK legal system – while our legal system in Australia historically draws heavily from English law, there are some very interesting key distinctions.

The exchange program further deepened the ties between PLN and Birketts. I can now give clients a more tailored referral based on my firsthand experience.

Through the exchange I forged many great friendships and connections, and have I memories that will certainly last a lifetime!

Some thanks are in order!

I am immensely grateful that I was fortunate enough to participate in such a fantastic initiative. I would like to thank IAG and the IAG committee members for making this experience possible, in particular John Ridgway and Daden Hunt – thank you so much for reinvigorating the exchange program and inviting me to participate.

I would also like to thank each and every person at Birketts who made me feel so welcome and at ease during my time there and in particular Adrian Seagers, partner of the corporate team at Birketts.

Lastly, I would like to extend a special thanks to my exchange buddy Clare Hedges – I could not have asked for a better partner, thank you for making my trip to Cambridge so special!

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