

Law firms risk alienating talent

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Widespread scrutiny by law students of firms that cut staff after the global financial crisis, or failed to offer summer clerks graduate positions, could have a detrimental effect on their ability to secure talent in the future, law student leaders say.

The entry into the summer clerkship market this year of Allen & Overy – which will compete for the first time alongside domestic firms for students' attention next Friday at the Sydney law careers fair – could also see some firms struggle to attract the top performers.

Students were aware which firms made staff redundant and which didn't, Macquarie University Law Society president Ryan Harvey said.

Several student law society presidents said students were aware that Clayton Utz and Corrs Chambers Westgarth offered \$10,000 to recent recruits to delay their starting date for six to 12 months in 2008-09.

One said: "Everyone knew that Clutz [Clayton Utz] in '08-09 only gave 50 per cent of their clerks grad offers. They all knew that Blake's made redundancies. They knew about the pay freezes across the board."

Many students entering the commercial law market as paralegals or seasonal clerks remain concerned that, after working hard to get a foot in the door, they might not be invited back as a graduate in the name of cost-cutting.

University of Technology Sydney Law Society president Michael Munk said redundancies would dramatically

affect students' perception of a firm as it would be seen as an unstable option. The obvious inference, he said, was that students who received multiple offers would not accept one from a firm that had made redundancies, or failed to offer clerks full-time employment.

The horror stories that continue to haunt those firms that cut their juniors could result in global competitors becoming even more attractive.

Mr Munk said A&O's Sydney program offered a competitive alternative. "In terms of mapping out options, especially with respect to international careers, this is definitely going to be something that is very attractive for students," he said, adding the entry of one of Britain's elite, or "magic circle", firms into the market brought international opportunity even closer to home.

Natalie Karam, co-president of the University of NSW Law Society, said students were familiar with global firms such as Norton Rose and A&O, which appealed to students with an international or Asia-Pacific focus.

Hannah Quadrio, Sydney University Law Society president, agreed. "Students are interested in the international firms and the opportunity it presents to travel," she said.

The financial crisis meant the landscape for undergraduates had changed and there was uncertainty over whether paralegals would progress to the clerkship ranks.

The result was that students who had worked for several years at a firm were applying for clerkships and being unsuccessful, according to students.