RESOURCE

Is a 5-Year Integrated Law Degree Worth It? A Career ROI Analysis

10 July 2026 · 6 min read · 1,213 words · 11 views

Every year, lakhs of students sit for CLAT (Common Law Admission Test) hoping to secure a seat in a National Law University. The dream is seductive: five years, one degree (BA LLB or BBA LLB), and a straight shot into a legal career that promises prestige, high salaries, and intellectual challenge.Is a 5-Year Integrated Law Degree Worth It?
But is it actually worth it? Let’s break down the real costs, real returns, and real alternatives — so you can make a decision based on numbers, not hype.

The Investment: What It Actually Costs

A 5-year integrated law degree isn’t cheap, and the cost varies wildly depending on where you study.

National Law Universities (NLUs): Tuition and hostel fees at top NLUs like NLSIU Bangalore, NALSAR Hyderabad, or NUJS Kolkata typically range from ₹10-16 lakhs for the entire 5-year program, including hostel and mess charges.

Private Law Schools: Institutions like Jindal Global Law School or Symbiosis can cost anywhere from ₹15-25 lakhs over five years — sometimes more, depending on the campus and facilities.

State Law Colleges/Universities: On the other end, state-run law colleges can cost as little as ₹1-3 lakhs for the full five years, making them far more accessible financially.

Opportunity Cost: This is the part most students forget to calculate. Five years is a long time. A student who instead does a 3-year graduation + works for 2 years could have earned a starting salary during that period, plus built two years of work experience. If we conservatively assume ₹3-4 lakhs/year in foregone earnings for those two extra years, that's another ₹6-8 lakhs in opportunity cost.

The Return: What You Can Actually Earn

This is where things get interesting — and where a lot of averages hide the real story.

Tier 1: National Law Universities (Top 5-10)

Graduates from NLSIU, NALSAR, NUJS, and similar institutions who get placed through campus recruitment at top-tier law firms (AZB, Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas, Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas, Trilegal, Khaitan & Co.) can expect starting salaries in the ₹15-20 lakhs per annum range, sometimes higher for standout candidates or those going into international firms.

Tier 2: Mid-Ranked NLUs and Good Private Law Schools

Placements here are less guaranteed. Starting salaries through campus placement typically range from ₹6-10 lakhs per annum, and a meaningful chunk of students don't get placed through campus recruitment at all — they find opportunities independently.

Tier 3: State Law Colleges and Lower-Ranked Institutions

Campus placement is often minimal or non-existent. Many graduates start with litigation (working under a senior advocate), which often pays a stipend of ₹10,000-25,000 per month in the early years — sometimes even less in smaller cities. This is where the "law degree = high salary" assumption breaks down completely.

The Litigation Reality

Here's something CLAT aspirants rarely hear from coaching institutes: **most lawyers in India are not in corporate law firms.** The majority end up in litigation, and litigation income in the early years is often low and unpredictable, regardless of which college you attended. It can take 5-10 years of grinding to build a practice that generates a comfortable income. The payoff can eventually be substantial — senior litigators and specialized counsel can earn very well — but the early-career ROI is often negative when compared to other career paths.

Doing the Actual Math

Let's compare three rough scenarios over a 10-year horizon (graduation + 5 years of career):

Scenario A: Top NLU + Corporate Law Firm

- Total cost (fees + opportunity cost): ~₹18-20 lakhs
- Year 1 salary: ₹18 lakhs; growing to ₹35-50 lakhs by year 5 (with promotions)
- **ROI: Strongly positive.** Break-even often within 1-2 years of starting work.

Scenario B: Mid-Tier NLU/Private College + Small-Mid Firm or In-house Role

- Total cost: ~₹15-25 lakhs
- Year 1 salary: ₹6-8 lakhs; growing to ₹12-18 lakhs by year 5

- **ROI: Moderately positive, but slower.** Break-even typically takes 4-6 years.

Scenario C: State College + Litigation

- Total cost: ~₹3-8 lakhs
- Year 1 income: ₹1.2-3 lakhs (stipend); growing slowly, highly variable
- **ROI: Weak to negative in the short-to-medium term.** Many in this bucket would have earned more, faster, in an alternate career (e.g., a 3-year degree + a job, or a professional certification).

The gap between Scenario A and Scenario C is enormous — and it's determined almost entirely by which college you get into, which in turn depends on your CLAT rank.CLAT 2026 UG Syllabus

What This Means If You're Preparing for CLAT

1. The degree isn't the product — the college is. "A law degree" is not a single career bet. A seat at NLSIU and a seat at an unranked private college are, financially speaking, almost different products altogether. If your CLAT rank isn't likely to land you in a top 15-20 NLU, it's worth seriously evaluating whether the 5-year path makes financial sense compared to alternatives.
2. Consider the 3-year LLB route as a genuine alternative. You don't need to commit to law at 18. Doing a bachelor's degree in a field you enjoy, working for a bit or building other skills, and then doing a 3-year LLB (if you still want to practice law) is a legitimate path — and one that keeps your options open for longer.
3. Factor in your risk appetite and interest in litigation. If you genuinely love the law — not just the idea of prestige — and are willing to grind through low-paying years to build a litigation practice or specialize in a niche area (IP, tax, arbitration), the long-term payoff can be very good, even if the 5-10 year ROI number looks weak on paper.
4. Don't ignore non-law exits. A huge number of NLU graduates don't end up practicing law at all — they move into consulting, policy, compliance, or business roles where the analytical training from law school is valued. If you factor these exits into the ROI calculation, integrated law degrees from good NLUs look considerably better, because the degree functions as a flexible, prestigious credential, not just a licence to litigate.

The Bottom Line

100+ Essential Legal Terms for CLAT 2026 | Complete Glossary

A 5-year integrated law degree is a genuinely good investment **if** you get into a top-tier NLU or have a realistic shot at a good corporate law firm placement. The ROI at that level is excellent, often comparable to or better than engineering or an MBA. But the same degree from a lower-ranked institution, without a clear plan, can leave you financially worse off than if you'd taken a shorter, cheaper path. The five years, the fees, and the opportunity cost are real and non-refundable — they don't automatically convert into a high salary just because you have "LLB" after your name.

The honest answer: It's not the degree that's worth it or not — it's *your specific situation* that determines the answer. Be brutally realistic about your likely CLAT rank, the placement track record of colleges within your reach, and your own appetite for the litigation grind before you commit five years and several lakhs of rupees to this path.

Disclaimer: Salary figures and cost estimates are approximate, general ranges based on commonly reported data and can vary by year, institution, and individual circumstances. Prospective students should verify current fee structures and placement statistics directly with specific institutions before making decisions.