

From benefits to barrister: my path to pupillage

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I've been reflecting on the journey and sacrifice aspiring lawyers make to qualify as solicitors or barristers in England and Wales. Many of my friends are still in the trenches fighting for their legal dream, so I want to take this opportunity to highlight the modern struggles of aspiring lawyers in 2023.

The traditional route on average takes three to four years of academic study at university and one year of vocational training at an accredited provider. During that time, it can be difficult to survive when your expenses are high and little to no money is coming in. But as with any university student, you accept the loss of earnings as an investment into your career in the hopes of future returns.

In addition to the financial struggles, the process itself is anxiety-inducing as you travel through the pressure cooker of preparing for each exam, conscious that any major mistakes could be the end of your legal aspirations which overtime takes its toll on your mental health. [...]

I spent one year on government benefits, struggling to secure a job as I discovered how little value my qualifications held outside of the legal job market, with prospective employers requiring a minimum of six months experience for any entry level roles. It can feel like a sick joke because you have to spend the majority, if not all, of your time acquiring legal experience to even give yourself a chance of success, and find yourself entrenched as you have no other experience to be a viable candidate outside of the legal market...

One of the most insidious aspects of the legal pursuit is after paying your pound of flesh you can be left with nothing, other than a few pieces of paper and an anvil of debt strapped to your ankle, should you not be able to secure a training contract or pupillage. The statistics currently show approximately 17 per cent of candidates securing pupillage in 2022/2023 and 18 per cent securing training contracts. That means that more than four out of five applicants are unsuccessful. What happens to them? And yet the number of places available for vocational courses by accredited providers is rising. How can that be? It's ethically repugnant and demonstrates a thirst for profits over people. I recall being on an internship, shadowing a barrister, who used to teach at one of the providers, and she handed in her resignation because she felt morally conflicted that her employer was taking large sums of money from students, many of whom she said weren't going to secure pupillage.

The reality for aspiring lawyers is that they are competing for an extremely finite number of places in a seller's market. Even after leaving law school, you have only achieved the baseline entry requirements for you to enter the competition. To stand any chance of winning, you have to embark on a campaign tour of voluntary work experience (more loss of earnings) which opens aspiring lawyers to being exploited. We all have a story to tell about a legal assistant being worked to the bone, on an entry level salary, for an unusually long period of time and being dangled a carrot by their employer that their dream of qualifying is round the next 70-hour week.[...]

On 6 May 2022 at 4:15pm, I received the email I'd been waiting for all these years... an offer for pupillage, enabling me to qualify as a criminal barrister for the Crown Prosecution Service! The weight of the world was finally off my shoulders and I felt like I could start enjoying life again.

There are things we can do to make the process fairer and more inclusive. Accredited providers should conduct more rigorous entry interviews that are more akin to the standards expected in training contract and pupillage interviews. There should be a greater emphasis on integrating careers advice into the course by running mandatory sessions with qualified lawyers. Those that are unsuccessful in securing a training contract or pupillage, following the vocational course should be offered an aftercare program that supports them for a meaningful period. Finally, to help aspiring barristers from low-income households, there should be more fundraising from chambers to provide bar course scholarships, similar to those available for aspiring solicitors by law firms. [...]