

Bridging the Bar

Srishti Suresh & Emma Hughes | Policy Officers, Bridging the Bar

The landscape of the Bar is changing. So, too, is the idea that there is an 'ideal' profile that lends itself to a successful practitioner. There is common consensus at the Bar that the application of the law is greatly improved by taking into account diversity of thought, diversity of representation, and diversity of interest. The public confidence in the profession is one that, equally, can only be encouraged by the ability to see society reflected in its advocates.

However, it takes time for a profession that has preserved itself under the aegis of tradition to catch up with ideology. What is required is a cultural shift; both in extant working conditions, and in entry to the profession. The question of which one should be tackled first is a chicken and egg problem. One informs the other in an endless loop.

The Bridging the Bar committee has attempted to provide an answer. When the team came together in early 2020, it was with a common purpose; to dismantle barriers to entry to the profession for historically underrepresented candidates, effectively bringing a new generation of practitioners to the Bar. Faced with the reality of lockdown, the committee thought long and hard about what such an initiative would look like; moreover, whether it was achievable, realistic, and well-served in the circumstances. The principal conclusion was; what did we have to lose?

The financial obstacles to the profession are often the greatest bar to students from underrepresented backgrounds. It is no secret that the assistance of the Inns scholarships is life-changing for aspiring barristers. However, for

newcomers to the Bar, navigating the application process can be particularly difficult. In response, the team at Bridging the Bar put together a scholarship mentoring scheme, pairing student applicants with barristers for further guidance. Headed by Emma Hughes and Will Marsden, the scheme was launched in September 2020, well ahead of the scholarship application deadline. In one week, Bridging the Bar received over 175 applications, and facilitated 75 mentoring partnerships between current practitioners and aspiring barristers seeking Inns scholarships.

A panel launch event promptly followed in October 2020, at which Bridging the Bar was joined by Mary Prior QC, Christa Richmond, Camila Ferraro, Neel Rokad, Beth Hibbert, Daisy Mortimer, and Charlie Taylor. Candidates heard from successful past scholars, who shared their best advice for securing a scholarship.

The ongoing response to the scheme has been heartening.



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Sephlin Sam tells the committee that her experience as a mentee has been "...brilliant. My mentor is extremely supportive and has given me feedback that has significantly improved my application skills and boosted my confidence.'

Safia Yousaf has high praise for her mentor, Flora Curtis from Francis Taylor Building, for having "...consistently supported, guided and advised me through my scholarship, pupillage and work experience applications. I'm so grateful for her!."

Afiya Amesu states that 'the mentoring programme has been insightful and invaluable. It has enabled me to dig deeper, learn more about my 'why' and receive incredibly useful feedback for my pupillage applications.'

Adenike Onasanya calls the mentoring scheme '...enriching', having '...enjoyed building a strong relationship with my mentor, who has provided me invaluable guidance.'

The mentoring scheme has been closely followed by the maiden voyage of the Bridging the Bar mini-pupillage scheme; at the time of writing, having partnered with over 60 chambers across a range of practice areas, to provide over 150 annual mini-pupilages to aspiring barristers. Since the application deadline in early February, the scheme has received over 400 applications from candidates across the globe. Bridging the Bar has no plans to scale back, with a marshalling programme, a schools-based skills and education programme, and an alternative work experience programme in the pipeline.

The achievements of Bridging the Bar thus far have been mobilised by the extraordinary generosity of the Bar. The organisation has benefitted from the time and expertise of hundreds of practitioners volunteering as mentors, markers for the mini-pupillage applications, and ambassadors



Top left to right: Andre Carty (Business Development Officer), Mass Ndow-Njie (Founder and Chairman), Abdul Qadim (Operations Manager), Eleanor Tack (Communications Officer).

Bottom left to right: Srishti Suresh (Policy Officer), Blessing Mukosha Park (Communications and External Affairs Officer), Emma Hughes (Policy Officer), Aaron Mayers (Deputy Chairman).

Not pictured: Will Marsden (Communications Officer), Mat Swallow (Public Relations Officer), Ishan Kolhatkar (Skills & Education Programme Director), Michael Etienne (Co-Director, Disability into the Bar Programme), Peter Jacobs (Communications and External Affairs Assistant)'



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for the cause. Bridging the Bar is supported by two Champions in Professor Jo Delahunty QC and Professor Leslie Thomas QC, both of whom have unfailingly cheered the progress of Bridging the Bar since it was just an idea in an email thread. The very ethos of Bridging the Bar is proven in its development.

At its inception, the committee was exclusively comprised of junior practitioners and aspiring

barristers from underrepresented backgrounds. Bridging the Bar has now grown into a partnership across practice areas, circuits, and levels of seniority.

The ultimate beneficiaries are the candidates that now feel confident that they have a place in the profession.

Katie Goodman has spoken of how with the help of the mentoring scheme, she went "from feeling like an imposter" to recognising herself "as a serious candidate".

Agnieszka Wlazlo shared that "being able to receive feedback from barristers is an invaluable opportunity I cherish from BTB - an amazing and insightful programme which opened my mind to life at the Bar."

Bridging the Bar is proud to partner with the FLBA, extending the opportunities available to candidates with an interest in building a family practice. For individual practitioners or chambers seeking further information on volunteering opportunities with Bridging the Bar, visit the website at www.bridgingthebar.org or contact the team at info@bridgingthebar.org.



Left to right: Sephlin Sam, Safia Yousaf, Afiya Amesu, Adenike Onasanya, Katie Goodman and Agnieszka Wlazlo.