



HOW TO GET PUPILLAGE

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This Friday, on the 5th of May, about 480 of the 3,000 or so aspiring barristers in England and Wales will receive offers for pupillage. With awards of up to £100,000, competition is fierce. The Bar Council's Pupillage Gateway Report shows that the number of applicants peaked in 2020/21 and it appears to be on the rise again.¹ In 2022/23, there were 2,782 applicants using the Gateway with an average of 11.9 applications per applicant. This gives first timers (on average) a 1 in 10 chance of success.

Equipped with this knowledge, I thought I would give it a go before the Bar Vocation Studies (BVS) course. I made 17 applications, predominantly to top commercial sets. I was fortunate to have some success in the beginning stages. I sat numerous assessments. There was the Straw Goat problem question (if you know, you know) and a timed drafting exercise featuring a client called Bruce, who had tunneled from his manor house to a natural cave. These were amusing, and a bit strange for someone who has only just finished the GDL, but they did not feel difficult. Then there were a few awkward interviews, one of which I was horribly late for as I had failed to read the email that requested candidates arrive 15 minutes before their interview slot to read a problem question.

Despite my best efforts, a week ago I found I was out of the running. At first, I was really upset. It stung. I had spent a lot of time and emotional effort on my applications, (and I had been on time for all but one). However, with a little hindsight, I now find myself pleased at how far I got. The Bar Council's data shows candidates are most likely to be successful after completing one to three rounds of applications. So rather than lick my wounds, I decided to prepare for next year by discussing the pupillage process with current barristers. Here is my revised five-part plan to getting pupillage, based on the statistics and those in the know.



So, if you are fortunate enough to get an offer this Friday, bravo. And if not, I look forward to joining you in the Gateway next year. May the odds be ever in your favour.

1. First, get a Bar Course qualification, or not

Whether you are brave, broke, or both, it makes perfect sense to apply for pupillage prior to this vocational advocacy training. Regardless of the miniscule success rate, the course is expensive so you may as well try. At City University, the PGDip version of the BVS is £16,670 and the LLM version is £19,730. Then there are rent and living costs, bringing the grand total to well over £50,000 (in London, for full time). The LLM version may be covered by the Student Loans Company; UK nationals who have been living in the UK for 3 years in a row before the first day of the first academic year can check their eligibility online.²

However, whether you have the capital or not, the return on investment for the course can be astonishingly low. Simply getting the qualification does not mean you will get pupillage. And if you don't, you have wasted a large amount of money on a practical skills course which is of little to no use elsewhere. I spoke to future pupil barrister Taz Aldeek about the ethical questionability of university course providers continuing to provide advocacy training to pupils when the odds of getting pupillage are so low.

“As with any course being offered at a considerable fee, either by an institution or online provider, part of critiquing the ethics of the transaction involves assessing the value or potential value received in return for the price of a course.



When it comes to the Bar Training Course (or BVS) the primary motivation for taking the course, for many, is to secure pupillage and qualify as a barrister in England and Wales. Albeit there are ancillary benefits for taking the course such as, developing advocacy skills and being called to the Bar of England and Wales, however, these benefits alone don't justify the price of the course.

Therefore, as we appreciate that more than 80% fail to secure pupillage, the return on investment with respect to the course, based on the price, is ethically alarming; this is further compounded by the fact that the source of finance for this revenue stream, cultivated by accredited providers, is mostly derived from impecunious students, hoping for a better future".

It is even more ethically alarming when considered against the Bar Council's report on the financial profile of applicants. As the 2020/21 recruitment process shows, the percentage of applicants who have no debt has increased by 8.4 per cent and the percentage of applicants with debt of over £60,000 has increased by 16.2 per cent. This suggests the number of applicants from wealthier backgrounds, or of independent means, is rising whereas those commencing the BVS and relying on loans is growing. What is particularly harrowing in this respect is that the Bar Council indicates applicants from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to receive an offer of pupillage (using parental occupation or free school meals as a metric). The exact disadvantage is not quantified.

As applicants cannot rely on BVS course admission as a reliable metric as to whether they will succeed, then what does indicate you might be on the path to securing pupillage? Good grades, and scholarship prizes.

The Bar Council reports that candidates with a first-class degree were 2.4 times more likely to receive a pupillage offer as compared to those who attained upper second-class honours. Getting top marks for the BVS also makes a big difference - 1 in 4 candidates who obtained 'Outstanding' at the vocational level received an offer of pupillage, compared

to 1 in 10 who obtained 'Very Competent'. And applicants who had received a scholarship were more than 3 times more likely to receive an offer of pupillage.

Evidently, embarking on the BVS is a big risk, it is prudent to recognise that pupillage is incredibly competitive. Chambers are ultimately looking for academic excellence; a 1st undergraduate degree, an 'Outstanding' at BVS, and ideally a scholarship. So, regardless of your financial or socio-economic status, before taking on £50,000 of debt or spending some of your inheritance, read the Bar Council data. Pupillage is becoming less and less likely, even for the very top candidates. If you have a strong appetite for risk, however, then you may be in the right place.

2. Use your Gateway form to showcase advocacy potential

So, you have decided to take a gamble, and try your chances with the BVS. Step two is to get your Gateway applications in early, using them to showcase your advocacy potential. It may seem an obvious point, but there is a lot of preparation and forethought that can go in to the forms get the best possible advantage over your counterparts. Indeed, the Gateway opens in the January and closes in February, but you can see the practice format and questions from the autumn before. This means that applicants have ample time to decide which chambers to apply to, and what to say in those applications. One way to get ahead is to get started with the application forms as soon as possible.

There are numerous resources for aspiring applicants to equip them with the practical skills required. I applied for the 'Women at the Commercial Bar' seminar hosted by One Essex Court. This was a brilliant workshop in a two-part series; one focusing on the application process itself, the other on in-person interview skills. For the former, in advance we were sent an example application of Elle Woods (from 'Legally Blonde', for those who aren't acquainted with the character), which was a brilliant way of organising the seminar and recognising the pitfalls of



some applicants. Anna Boase KC of One Essex Court explained:

"Our workshops are designed to give participants the opportunity to actually have a go at the skills needed for applications and interviews in a supportive environment, where they can get constructive, personal feedback from barristers. We were delighted so many talented women joined our workshops this year. It's great to hear that pupillage candidates have found the sessions valuable."

The constructive feedback really helped me. The advice was so detailed. I felt better prepared to tailor each application and ultimately, to get the right bit in the right box. I was also incredibly impressed that One Essex Court were taking action in such a practical way. It encouraged me to apply to that set. "The workshops are just the latest activity offered by One Essex Court; our 'Women at the Commercial Bar' programme has been running for seven years now, giving information and encouragement to potential women barristers through special roadshows, open days, mentoring and careers clinics" said Anna Boase KC.

My advice to those applying for pupillage 2025 would be to apply for these types of workshops early on, and dedicate a reasonable amount of time to practicing filling out the practice forms, getting it checked over by mentors if possible. Go to open days, minis, diversity and outreach programmes, careers clinics and the like. Grab any offers of help gratefully, and with both hands. Making the most of these valuable resources can really help candidates get a competitive advantage.

3. Accept that rejection is part of the game

So how many applications? To where? And when? My original logic was to apply to as many of the 'best' sets as possible for the practice area that I was interested in. I now take a different view. I believe, both from the advice I have since been given, and from my experience of going through the process this year, that it would have been better to apply to a wider range of chambers - to include the ones I really wanted, and some that were not widely considered the 'top' or 'best' in that field. Pupillage is insanely competitive, so it may

be a case of simply getting your foot in the door. One can always apply for a third six elsewhere. Of course, if you are relying on the pupillage award being a certain amount (in order to live), this may be easier said than done. Work out your finances, apply for the Inns' scholarships early, and work out which chambers are your top and 'middle' choices. Then make your best bets

In terms of quantity, I would suggest to work out how much time, energy, and intellectual effort you are willing to dedicate to the task, set yourself up a spreadsheet, and apply to as many as is practical. The earlier you start, and the more sets you apply to, the more likely you are to get offers. If the average candidate is applying to around 12, needless to say, you put yourself at a great disadvantage by only applying to your top two or three.

In terms of when, a lot of people are now coming to the Bar later in life. Be they doctors, academics, actors, pilots, or scientists, a quick scan of recent pupils' profiles shows that chambers are indeed hiring candidates who have a wealth of experience in other, often glamorous, careers. Stefano Braschi came to the Bar after spending over ten years as a professional actor. In 2019 he enrolled on the GDL at City Law School and secured pupillage during that year. Stefano was in the first cohort of students on the new Bar Course at the Inns of Court College of Advocacy. After successfully completing pupillage in October 2022, he became a tenant at Serle Court. Seeing as it is so very rare to secure pupillage so early in the game, I spoke to Stefano about his experience:

"Everyone's journey to the Bar will be unique; there is no right way or wrong way to prepare for this career. I knew very little about the law or legal profession before starting and relied heavily on the one or two barristers I knew, and others kind enough to offer advice. This is a collegiate, welcoming profession, even if it may appear intimidating and mysterious from the outside. The Inns are an invaluable resource, not least in terms of their generous scholarships, but so is the wider community. Do not be afraid to ask questions.

Being a career-changer has its advantages and disadvantages. For those in their thirties or beyond, these



may be more pronounced. Every individual is different of course but, using a very broad brush, I would say there are three big advantages to coming at this process later in life.

First is standing out. Chambers have to sift through hundreds of written applications every year and it helps to be able to draw on experiences that are perhaps a little less than usual. Whether you persuade any particular set of chambers to invite you to interview or not, your application is likely to get noticed and that is a good thing.”

Indeed, as your application will be one amongst hundreds, being a career-changer can really help you stand out. The Gateway is not the place to be a wallflower.

There are other aspects of your profile which may help your application if you are in your thirties, as opposed to your twenties. Stefano continues by offering that a second benefit to coming to the Bar later in life is the cultivation of resilience:

“It is important to have a thick skin when applying for pupillage, as it is in practice. This is a competitive process, and you cannot expect everything to go your way. For those who have experienced setbacks and disappointment, in particular as regards their professional lives, the application process is perhaps easier to navigate. An actor’s job is to get up in front of strangers and risk being ridiculed or, worse, ignored. Rejection is part of the game, but it takes time before you learn how not to take it personally. Many friends have said how much better prepared they for pupillage interviews the second time around. I suspect that many career-changers have a slight head-start in that regard.

The third advantage is self-awareness; having the confidence to say what you don’t know, not just what you do. It helps to go into pupillage with a sense of perspective, understanding that everyone around you has something to teach: juniors, silks, clerks and staff. It’s not all about impressing people, it’s also about learning from them. As long as you are happy to

start from the bottom, being a little bit older can help. Having had a different job, especially one in which you have to interact with a variety of people, is likely to mean you can adapt to different situations. It is important to know when to step up and when to step back.”

When you consider just how many applications pupillage panels are seeing, you really need to stand out to even get an interview. Having a wealth of career experience can help. Whatever you are aiming to showcase, it is a lot easier to do so if your examples are drawn from real career experience. Emotional intelligence, resilience, commercial awareness or entrepreneurial spirit. These are all qualities chambers want to see. So, if you are in your twenties, and are having no luck at pupillage, there is no reason going off to do something entirely different won’t be to your advantage.

4. Understand the price you pay

Alongside strong academics, an awareness of the inevitability of rejection, resilience, and self-awareness, a healthy dose of realism can go a long way. I myself have taken the time to really take stock, and to recognise what I am to be giving up by going to the Bar. Stefano identifies certain drawbacks, and the importance of weighing up whether the sacrifices are worth it:

“As for disadvantages, the first point is that you are giving up (or stepping away from) something real for something that, for the time being, is not. Making that choice is not easy, practically or psychologically. There will be elements of your career you love, even if you know it’s time to move on. Financially, you are committing to at the very least two years of study with no income or reduced income. This process will also impact your obligations as a carer, a parent, a partner. There are no guarantees and so you will have to consider whether the risks are worth it.

Second, if you are used to a different working life it can be particularly challenging to get used to the intense

pressures and anxieties which are unique to the Bar. If you have no point of comparison, I suspect it may be a little easier.

Third, though not specific to career-changers, having studied on the law-conversion may mean that you feel a bit behind as compared to those who have studied law for four-plus years, albeit the GDL is a fantastic innovation which draws people of all backgrounds and interests to this profession. It may mean imposter syndrome and may mean more reading in on evening and weekends. But none of this is insurmountable; the Bar and the bench are both filled with members who have excelled in the law after first studying and working in numerous other fields."

This is so true. And if you want to be surrounded by smart, interesting, interested people, then the Bar is a brilliant place to carve your career. I am fortunate to have, both in my role at TL4 and during my time at the DIFC Courts, to have met some fascinating people. I have a wonderful mentor and have had a lot of advice and support from many barristers, even prior to my joining an Inn. It has also made me aware of just how wide the range of people in the profession is. As Stefano notes, 'there is no such thing as the perfect applicant, the perfect pupil or the perfect barrister. The important thing is to be yourself, to do your best and to keep learning.'

5. Being resourceful

The last point in my five-point plan: make the most of resources out there and be resourceful when it comes to learning about different chambers. On top of the obvious (good grades, legal work experience, scholarships), take time to know exactly what a set does and what makes it different to the others you are applying for. Looking at chambers' websites alone will not suffice. One must be aware of the work of the existing members of chambers. Dr Sally Penni MBE has a brilliant podcast, 'Talking Law', which is incredibly useful to this end. I have found this an invaluable resource. The most recent episode, (series 3, episode 1) is with Lord Jonathan Sumption. Stefano Braschi is also in the process of developing a podcast which chronicles the

experiences of various pupils during their pupillage year. The working title is "The Pupillage Diary", so make sure you also keep an eye out for that later this year. No doubt it will be useful resource for future candidates. Podcasts, mini pupillages, conferences, online seminars – these are all valuable ways of finding out the things that aren't easily found on a chamber's website. In a sea of so many candidates, it is not enough to simply be a brilliant candidate, you must show that you really have done your homework on that set and can demonstrate a genuine understanding of the issues affecting that specific practice area.