

Legal Careers: Barrister



A guide for law and non-law students researching the route to becoming a barrister

The Legal Sector is diverse, dynamic and challenging. Law impacts every aspect of society, reflected in diverse opportunities and employers. The word 'lawyer' is a general term used to describe solicitors, barristers, legal executives and others – it's often used to describe the whole legal profession. There are almost eight times as many solicitors as barristers. Getting into the industry can be competitive and during your time at university you should engage in work experience or volunteering in addition to having a good academic record.

Barrister

Being a barrister is a unique varied and rewarding profession. However competition for pupillage is fierce and there are more people training to be barristers than there are opportunities to practice. It is essential that you carry out significant research about the role, the route to qualifying and about employers. You will also need relevant work experience, a very strong academic record plus a clear understanding of your motivations to become a barrister.

Barristers offer advice about legal cases to clients and advocate on their behalf in court. They are instructed by solicitors, and are mostly self-employed. A minority are employed in-house by companies, public bodies or law firms. Barristers work in groups called 'sets', sharing premises (chambers). A barrister does not work for the 'set', they just work at them as a 'tenant'.

Types of roles

The self-employed bar

Roughly 80% of barristers train and work in chambers across England and Wales. Although they will be a member of chambers, they are to all intents and purposes self-employed and earn fees rather than a regular salary. Some chambers (and therefore its barristers) will specialise in one area of law, although many sets will cover a range of practice areas and cases. Some will call themselves a 'civil law set' and cover both private and public sector clients in practice areas such as planning, employment and human rights law - some civil law sets will also have a strong commercial practice. Commercial sets focus on domestic and international trade, business, commerce and finance. On the whole, criminal barristers earn the lowest fees (some of the work is paid by legal-aid); commercial barristers command the highest fees.

There can be considerable differences in the nature of a barrister's work and some barristers almost never appear in court. Whilst barristers specialising in family

or criminal law may appear in court most days, barristers specialising in commercial work may spend the majority of their time in chambers, drafting pleadings and opinions. It makes commercial sense to avoid lengthy disputes in court, so often barristers may be involved earlier in more complicated, demanding commercial matters. However, advocacy remains a vital skill for the barrister and is one of the most distinguishing elements of the barrister's role.

The employed bar

About 20% of barristers practise at the employed bar, such as the Government Legal Department or the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). There are fewer training opportunities (pupilages) within the employed bar but some qualified barristers transition to the employed bar, as it offers a regular salary and a better work/life balance.



Skills & Experience

As self-employed individuals managing an often heavy workload, barristers need to have excellent time management skills and the stamina and resilience to cope with the stress of long hours, tight deadlines and high level responsibility, and the ability to cope with an irregular income (particularly as a junior barrister at the criminal or family bar).

When applying for the Bar it is important to be able to demonstrate all of these attributes. In particular, three key qualities that chambers tend to be looking for are:

Intellectual ability; this can be demonstrated through strong academic results at A level and on your degree.

Potential to be a strong advocate; this can be demonstrated through your involvement in mooting/debating/other public speaking. Joining **RHUL Law Society** can offer the opportunity to practice mooting.

Commitment to the Bar; evidence of this can be shown through undertaking [mini pupillages](#), open days, volunteering or other relevant work experience .

Mini pupillages are the Bar's equivalent of an internship or vacation scheme and last one to five days. Most mini pupillages are short and unassessed, so sets are usually able to offer between a dozen and several dozen mini-pupillages a year. It is important to check with individual chambers for their exam application criteria. The majority of sets state that mini-pupillages are intended for those who have already studied some law – i.e. second-year law students and above and GDL students and above. However, there are exceptions. A list of mini pupillages are [listed on the Chambers Student website](#). Whatever the criteria, all students will be expected to have some demonstrable interest in a career at the Bar.

A simple way to demonstrate your interest in the bar is to sit in the **public galleries in the Crown Court, Magistrates' Court or Coroner's Court** and observe how barristers work. Locally, Staines, Guildford and Woking have courts and you can contact them for more details. You can also watch the [Supreme Court Livestream](#)

Not all work experience needs to relate directly to law. **Work** or **voluntary** experiences are highly valued by legal employers across all areas. Depending on the areas of law you are interested in you may consider

working as a **support worker or advisor** with a specific client group, for example; offenders, refugees or asylum seekers, families, victims of domestic abuse etc. For the commercial bar, understanding how businesses operate is crucial, so **work experience in a commercial company** could help support your application.

Diversity & Inclusion

Recruiters are keen to have a diverse workforce and many will have policies and processes that are proactive in recruiting students and graduates from diverse backgrounds. [The Bar Council](#) , [Inns of Court](#) and the wider profession are determined to widen access to the Bar, and to create a diverse and inclusive profession. A number of initiatives exist to help achieve this from offering specific bursaries and scholarships to work experience programmes. Many Chambers also run their own bespoke programmes and are very keen to encourage applications and recruit individuals from diverse backgrounds.

To find out the policies and attitudes of the recruiters that you are interested in, explore their equality, diversity and inclusion policy. Search their website to see if they have any specific staff networks, look out for external accreditation such as whether they are a Disability Confident employer, a Stonewall Diversity Champion or part of the Mindful Employer charter promoting mental health at work. A key place to look is to see what they do to celebrate diversity on their Facebook and Twitter pages.

<https://myplusstudentsclub.com/> annual law event plus resources to support students and graduates with disabilities into jobs.

<https://www.rarerecruitment.co.uk/> Rare through their Vantage platform use contextual data to support applications for underrepresented groups. See their website for how to join.

[Access to the bar](#) Opportunities to participate in this scheme are advertised through RHUL Law Department in the Autumn Term

<https://bridgingthebar.org/> committed to increasing the equality of access to opportunities in the legal profession across all underrepresented groups. We help students who, owing to their disability, ethnic background, socio-economic background, education or sexuality, belong to groups which are statistically underrepresented in the profession.

[Pegasus Access and Support Scheme \(PASS\)](#) Scheme designed to support high achieving students from under-represented backgrounds by providing the experiences they need to be able to thrive at the Bar.

Qualification & Training

There are three components to complete your training to become a barrister and full details can be found at the [Bar Standards website](#).

The academic component:

An undergraduate law degree or any undergraduate degree plus the Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL).

The vocational component:

A Bar Training Course offered by an Authorised Education and Training Organisation (AETO)

The pupillage or work based learning component.

In order to be authorised to practice as a barrister you must first undergo a period of work-based, practical training under the supervision of an experienced barrister. This is known as pupillage. Finding a pupillage is extremely competitive.

In addition, you must also:

Complete the **Bar Course Aptitude Test** and

Join an Inn of Court before you start the Bar Training Course (BTC)

Meet the requirements in the Professional Statement for Barristers

Inns of Court

There are four Inns of Court [Inner Temple](#) [Middle Temple](#) [Lincolns Inn](#) and [Grays Inn](#)

Each Inn differs slightly in character but all offer similar support. Choosing an Inn is a personal decision but will have no impact on where you can apply for pupillage. The Inns also provide a substantial amount of financial assistance for the various stages of becoming a barrister awarding over £6 million in scholarships every year. Closing dates for scholarships are typically: the November before you start your Bar Training Course for Bar Training support or the May

before you start your GDL for conversion course support.

The earliest you can join an Inn is usually in the second year of your law degree. Joining an Inn will give you access to a supportive professional network and can help with mini pupillages advocacy and other professional development training.



Further Resource

<https://www.barcouncil.org.uk/>

<https://www.barstandardsboard.org.uk/>

[Pupillage and how to get it](#)

<https://www.chambersstudent.co.uk/> comprehensive guide to training and listings of all chambers and specialisms. Includes a list of mini pupillages.

<https://www.thelawyer.com/careers-hub/> news and information designed especially for students

<https://www.lawcareers.net/Barristers> insight and information on training and firms as well as mini and pupillage listings

[All about law barrister](#) information and advice on training and work experience

<https://targetjobs.co.uk/career-sectors/law-barristers>

<https://www.prospects.ac.uk/jobs-and-work-experience/job-sectors/law-sector>

Royal Holloway careers service has recordings from law week and additional resources for law [here](#)