

Alternative route to the Bar

updated on 04 February 2022



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As the pupillage gateway season commences, barrister hopefuls will be spending much time over the coming months perfecting their applications. A barrister at one of the UK's largest leading family law Chambers, Frankie Shama, writes about his journey to the Bar and why taking an alternative route can make you stand out.

Unlike many readers, I did not always want to be a barrister. I studied English at university, had no lawyers in my family, and confess I only really learned what a barrister was after I graduated. Post-graduation, a couple of weeks' work experience in a firm of solicitors provided me with the opportunity to shadow many of 4PB's international child abduction team on cases in the Royal Courts of Justice. I never looked back. I made it my mission to become a family barrister.

However, I opted for something of an unusual route. I undertook my Graduate Diploma in Law and Bar Professional Training Course (BPTC) (now Bar Practice Courses) part-time, paired with full-time work. My rationale: if you are going to take a few years out after completing your legal studies to gain the requisite skills to make a decent pupillage application, why not take a slightly slower route and make it part of the plan?

Find out more about Bar courses here.

An intense but ultimately very rewarding four years followed. I undertook work as a youth advocate, and spent time as a paralegal for a firm of solicitors specialising in private children and the financial consequences of divorce. I then landed the job I always hoped for as a legal assistant at 4PB. I began the role in January 2019, applied and secured pupillage while on the job, and continued in this role for the entirety of my BPTC year. My pupillage began at 4PB in January 2021.

Was it worth it?

Having now had a little time to reflect on my pre-pupillage years, I believe so.

I learned a huge amount that I would have learned during pupillage before I had even qualified as a barrister. I came to pupillage feeling confident and more assured as a result. Having drafted skeleton arguments and undertaken legal research for members of chambers for two years, it was easier to keep up with my pupil supervisors' requests. It also made the transition to my second-six smoother, having had a longer period to work on my preferred style and approach.

I have also come to practice more informed about issues relevant to my area of specialism. Pupillage at 4PB involves undertaking work across all family specialisms – public, private and international children law and financial remedy work. It is a lot of ground to cover in a relatively short amount of time. Having a basic grasp of topical issues meant I was more equipped to deal with my own cases. This is particularly important in an area like family law, which was barely explored on any of my professional courses.

The other obvious benefit was connections, not just with members of chambers but with solicitors too. Many solicitors who instruct me now remember me when I was taking a note for a member of chambers, or sitting with them at the back of a courtroom.

Finally, while the majority of my work was behind the scenes, having the opportunity to shadow barristers was hugely beneficial in developing my own advocacy style.

I have now come out of the other side as a tenant at the set of chambers I had hoped to end up at all those years ago. It feels great. I believe my time as a legal assistant has been crucial in shaping me as a practitioner. I want to encourage more students to consider part-time options paired with experience as a route to the Bar. I also hope more chambers will adopt a model similar to the one at 4PB to provide opportunities for future talent.

Frankie Shama is a barrister at 4PB.