

The help that students from minorities need



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Debo Nwauzu believes that work placements are essential

A scheme to help black students bolster their applications to firms and chambers is having to be cut back

Lawyers are now happier to talk about diversity in the legal profession than they were a decade ago. But while some of the old stereotypes have been discarded, inequality remains rife in the senior ranks.

The latest research from the Legal Services Board, the profession's superregulator, found that increases in the numbers of black and ethnic minority solicitors and barristers had not translated into proportionate representation at the senior levels of either branch of the profession, and there are no judges from ethnic minorities in the two highest courts.

To try to address the problem, Debo Nwauzu, a former barrister and solicitor, set up the Black Lawyers Directory (BLD) in 2006. The organisation provides mentors, workshops,

work placements and networking events for schoolchildren and university students, helping them to enter the profession. But despite the pressure on the profession to encourage such students, BLD is being forced to make cuts as some funding from sponsors has dried up. "I feel so wretched," Nwauzu says. "We are grateful [to our sponsors], but next year, for the first time, we have to cut back."

Under the banner of its legal gateway scheme, BLD runs two projects: today's children, tomorrow's lawyers, aimed at schoolchildren, and legal launch pad (LLP). The latter helps law school students to bolster their applications to firms and chambers. Between January and September, it provides training days, work experience at partner firms and chambers and assigns each student a mentor, in some cases, a well-known City lawyer.

This year 55 students completed the scheme, BLD's largest intake. However, next year only 40 places will be available. "Just as the demand is getting higher, we have problems with funding," Nwauzu says. "We do an incredible amount of work for the money we get, which is not a huge sum."

Nwauzu says that the Bar particularly needs to do "a lot more". The BLD has only had a single chambers offering its support: No5 Chambers, one of the largest. "I suppose barristers are self-employed and everybody is managing his or her own career, but when it comes to giving back, they are dire. We have students who want to go to the Bar but we can't help them." Nwauzu says she gets more support from solicitors but even they "could be better".

Cash, however, is not the primary issue: work experience is even more important. "If we could have five to seven more sponsors for the LLP, then we could offer students more work placements," Nwauzu says. "What matters is that sponsors are able to provide time and effort. Then we can talk about money."

Nwauzu is more complimentary about firms' internal efforts towards diversity. "I don't think government pressure makes much difference," she says. "Businesses are driving it — sometimes clients, but often the firms themselves. If something is going to affect your business, you make changes. That's common business sense."

Success stories from the LLP class of 2011 include that of Aba Edwards-Idun, a first-class honours student from Queen Mary University of London, who starts her training contract with Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer in 2013. Sunny Huang, also from the class of 2011, starts with White & Case, the US firm, next year.

BLD is accepting applications for its 2012 LLP scheme until November 30. "If you're serious about a career in law," says Nwauzu, "it's a leg up — to polish what is already there." But she warns: "If somebody is not cut out to be a lawyer this programme is not going to help them."

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