monthly

NEWSLETTER

YOUTH BAR ASSOCIATION MARCH 2026

Message From our Founder

Welcome to this edition of the Youth Bar Association newsletter! It is encouraging to see the continued enthusiasm, professionalism, and commitment shown by our members across recent events and initiatives! Thank you to everyone who has contributed, and I hope you find this edition both informative and engaging!

Bella Frewin, President and Founder of the Youth Bar Association

Message From the Editor

Welcome to the eighth edition of the YBA Newsletter. This month, Amelie Beck explores the limitations of international institutions in a compelling and thought-provoking piece. I am also pleased to introduce Emaan Rizwan Gubitra, our new Legal Columnist, beginning with an insightful article examining the pressures faced by junior barristers and the question of specialisation. Alongside these features, you will find a range of excellent articles submitted by our talented members. Finally, we invite you to take part in our poll and share your thoughts on what you enjoy, what you would like to see improved, and what you would like us to include in future editions.

Ari Allana Blunt, Vice President of Publications & Outreach

IMPROVEMENT AND FEEDBACK FORM

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SOCIETY UPDATES

MOCK TRIAL – R V CALDER

Charge:
Assault occasioning actual bodily harm

A huge congratulations to Sophia and Sumaiyah, who were legal councillors at the mock trial mock trial of R v Calder on the 21st of February! After impressive performances and intensive questioning of witnesses, it was found that the defendant was guilty with a reduced sentence! Well done to both and thank you for your participation

UPCOMING EVENTS!

DEBATE – 21ST OF MARCH – 12PM – EMAIL TO APPLY
Should governments provide a universal basic income to combat poverty and automation?

DEBATE – 29TH OF MARCH – 12PM – EMAIL TO APPLY
Should juveniles be treated as adults in the legal system?

WHY GLOBAL INSTITUTIONS STRUGGLE TO PREVENT CONFLICT

As 2026 progresses, the international legal system is entering a period of profound stress. The post-WWII "rules-based order," long regarded as the foundation of global governance, is increasingly challenged by shifting power dynamics, regional instability, and the growing assertiveness of non-aligned actors. For early-career legal professionals, the central task is not only to understand the existing architecture of international law, but to assess how it must evolve to remain effective in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment.

A primary source of institutional strain lies in the structural design of the United Nations. Although the UN was created to safeguard collective security, its core decision-making body, the Security Council, still reflects the geopolitical realities of 1945. The veto power held by the five permanent members continues to serve as both a stabilizing mechanism and a significant constraint. While it ensures that major powers remain engaged in the system, it also frequently results in operational paralysis during crises. This rigidity limits the UN's ability to respond to contemporary threats that are more diffuse and regionally complex than those envisioned when the organization was founded.

The principle of state sovereignty further complicates the international system's capacity for timely and effective action. International law is grounded in state consent, institutions tasked with upholding universal human rights often lack the authority to intervene without broad political agreement. This tension produces a recurring pattern: early warnings are issued, diplomatic statements are made, and yet meaningful action is delayed until violence has escalated. For younger observers and practitioners, this raises a fundamental question about the credibility of global norms when enforcement appears inconsistent or politically contingent.

This credibility gap is not only theoretical. Selective adherence to international humanitarian and human rights law undermines the legitimacy of the entire system. When powerful states apply legal norms unevenly, it signals to other actors that compliance is optional. Over time, this erodes the protective function of international law, particularly for civilians in conflict zones who rely on these norms as a safeguard against the worst forms of violence.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) exemplifies both the aspirations and the limitations of contemporary global justice mechanisms. Established to prosecute genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, the ICC represents a significant institutional commitment to accountability. However, its jurisdiction remains constrained by the fact that several major powers have not ratified the Rome Statute. This creates significant gaps in coverage, leaving entire regions beyond the Court's reach. Moreover, the ICC lacks an independent enforcement mechanism and must rely on state cooperation to execute arrest warrants. Recent refusals to comply with ICC obligations highlight how political considerations can impede accountability, weakening the Court's deterrent effect.

To strengthen the international system, a shift toward preventive diplomacy is essential. This requires investment in early-warning mechanisms, enhanced support for impartial mediation, and greater empowerment of regional organizations that possess contextual knowledge and operational proximity. It also necessitates serious institutional reform discussions, including proposals to limit the use of the veto in cases involving mass atrocities and to modernize governance structures to reflect contemporary geopolitical realities.

Yet even the most well-designed reforms cannot substitute for political will. International law provides a framework for collective action, but its effectiveness ultimately depends on the commitment of states to uphold and enforce it. Without consistent adherence, the system risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive.

For young legal professionals, this moment presents both a challenge and an opportunity. The institutions we inherit are imperfect, but they remain indispensable. Our responsibility is not only to interpret the law, but to advocate for its consistent application, to scrutinize selective enforcement, and to contribute to reforms that enhance institutional legitimacy and effectiveness. In doing so, we help ensure that international law remains a meaningful tool for advancing global stability and human dignity.

IS SPECIALISATION HAPPENING TOO EARLY?

The Pressure on Junior Barristers to 'Brand' Themselves

There is a peculiar irony at the heart of modern legal education. Law is, by its nature, a discipline that trains the mind to hold competing arguments in tension, to resist premature conclusions, and to engage honestly with complexity. Yet the machinery of entry to the Bar: the competitive pupillage application process, the carefully curated professional profiles, the LinkedIn summaries and mini-pupillage circuits, increasingly demands something different: a decisive, confident, marketable self. A brand. The question this piece sets out to examine is whether that demand is arriving too early, and what is lost when aspiring barristers are encouraged to narrow their intellectual horizons before they have had the chance to understand how wide those horizons might be.

I. The Architecture of Early Specialisation

The pressure to specialise begins earlier than many aspiring barristers appreciate. Long before pupillage applications open, students pursuing the Bar Professional Training Course are advised, often informally, sometimes explicitly, to develop a 'practice area focus' that runs through their personal statement like a spine. Chambers' websites, meanwhile, organise themselves by specialism, and their recruitment literature tends to reward candidates who can demonstrate sustained engagement with a particular field over those who reveal a more eclectic intellectual appetite. The structure of the application process, in other words, architecturally rewards commitment, even if that commitment is performed rather than felt.

Richard Susskind, whose work on the transformation of the legal profession has become essential reading for those entering the Bar, notes that the legal market itself has grown increasingly segmented, with clients, whether corporate solicitors briefing commercial counsel or legally aided defendants, expecting practitioners who possess deep domain knowledge rather than broad generalist facility. This is, at one level, an understandable market response. The law has grown enormously complex. The practitioner who attempts to master everything risks mastering nothing. And yet the inference drawn from this, that junior barristers should plant their professional flag as early as possible, is a non sequitur that deserves scrutiny.

II. The 'Brand' Imperative and Its Discontents

The language of 'personal branding' has migrated from the world of corporate marketing into the legal profession with surprising speed and remarkably little critical resistance. Careers advisors, pupillage coaches, and even well-meaning senior practitioners urge junior lawyers to 'own' their narrative, to identify their 'unique selling points,' and to project a coherent professional identity across every platform and interaction. LinkedIn profiles are scrutinised. Mooting choices are strategized. Mini-pupillages are selected not out of curiosity but out of positioning logic.

None of this is entirely without merit. The Bar is competitive, and self-presentation matters. A candidate who cannot articulate why they are drawn to a particular area of practice may genuinely struggle to convince a pupillage committee of their suitability. But there is a meaningful difference between being able to explain one's interests with clarity and sincerity, and constructing a marketized identity in advance of the experience that would give such an identity its foundations.

III. What Is Lost in Early Narrowing

The most obvious casualty of premature specialisation is breadth of knowledge. The law is not, in reality, a set of hermetically sealed practice areas. Commercial law bleeds into public law; family law raises constitutional questions; crime intersects with regulatory frameworks that have deep roots in administrative and EU-derived law. The barrister who has spent three years cultivating a singular identity as a 'construction and engineering' practitioner may find themselves ill-equipped to notice the public procurement dimension of a dispute, or to interrogate the statutory basis of an expert report, simply because the ambient legal knowledge that would have made such connections available has never been developed.

There is also a more subtle cost to intellectual development. The Bar is, at its best, a place of genuine intellectual engagement. The advocate who arrives in court with not just technical mastery but real curiosity: who has read widely, who can place a submission within a broader jurisprudential tradition, who is alert to the human dimensions of a legal dispute, is a more effective counsel than one whose formation has been purely vocational. Bacon's observation that 'reading maketh a full man' retains its force. The pressure to brand, however, tends to crowd out the kind of broad, apparently impractical intellectual curiosity that produces fullness of mind.

Carol Dweck's research on 'growth mindset' is instructive here.The architecture of early specialisation, presenting students with a model of professional identity as something to be constructed and then defended, arguably cultivates precisely the fixed mindset that is least conducive to the kind of adaptive, intellectually vigorous practice that distinguishes great advocates from competent technicians.

IV. The Structural Pressures Driving the Trend

It would be unfair to attribute the pressure towards early specialisation solely to the institutional preferences of chambers or the anxieties of careers advisors. Structural forces within the legal market are genuinely driving towards greater specialism.Legal aid cuts have made generalist criminal and family practice economically precarious for many sets, concentrating sustainable practice at the commercial end of the market. Legal technology is disaggregating the components of legal work in ways that make deep expertise more valuable and broad generalism less so. And the sheer volume of case law and regulation in any given specialist area means that the days when a barrister might plausibly maintain a truly general practice, taking everything from planning appeals to product liability, have largely passed.

What is worth questioning, however, is whether the appropriate response to these market realities is to impose specialism on barristers before they have developed the intellectual and experiential foundations on which meaningful specialism rests. There is a difference between a practitioner who has spent a decade building expertise in financial services regulation and has arrived at specialism through genuine depth of engagement, and a student who has declared a specialism because the application process required one. The former has become a specialist. The latter has merely assumed a specialist's label.

Helena Kennedy, reflecting on her own formation at the Bar, has observed that it was precisely the breadth of her early criminal practice, dealing with clients whose lives were shaped by poverty, structural disadvantage, and the full range of human difficulty, that gave her the contextual understanding necessary to be an effective advocate rather than merely a skilled technician. That kind of formation is harder to acquire when the trajectory towards specialism begins before pupillage.

V. The Wellbeing Dimension

There is also a wellbeing dimension to this question that deserves acknowledgement. The Bar Council's wellbeing surveys have consistently identified junior barristers as experiencing disproportionate levels of stress and professional anxiety, particularly in their early years at the Bar. Part of this is attributable to the structural conditions of practice, the self-employed model, the insecurities of tenancy, the often brutal competitive environment. But some of it may also reflect the difficulty of inhabiting a branded professional identity that has been constructed in advance of the experience needed to make it feel genuinely one's own.

The young barrister who has spent years performing certainty about a chosen specialism may find it difficult to admit to a supervisor or clerk that they are not sure this is really what they want to do, or that a neighbouring area of practice genuinely interests them more. The gap between the performed identity and the experienced self can generate a form of professional inauthenticity that is not merely intellectually costly but psychologically draining. Authenticity: the alignment between what one presents and what one actually thinks and feels, is not a soft concern. It is foundational to sustainable professional life.

VI. Towards a More Honest Account of Professional Formation

None of this is an argument against specialism, nor against the importance of self-presentation. Both matter. The question is one of timing and framing. What might a more honest account of professional formation at the Bar look like?

Adam Grant's work on intellectual humility suggests that the most effective professionals in complex domains are those who maintain what he calls 'confident uncertainty': they know what they know, they pursue it with conviction, but they hold their views about what they do not yet know with genuine openness. Applied to pupillage applications and early career development, this might look like a candidate who can say: 'My studies and work experience have led me to a genuine and sustained interest in public law, and I am deeply curious about how it intersects with questions in commercial and human rights practice that I have not yet had the opportunity to explore in depth.' This is not a failure of self-definition. It is an honest and intellectually credible account of where genuine professional formation actually sits.

VII. Conclusion: Branding Versus Becoming

There is a profound difference between branding and becoming. Branding is a presentational act: it involves selecting and projecting an identity, managing perceptions, and curating the impression one makes on an audience. Becoming is a developmental process: it involves exposure, reflection, failure, revision, and the gradual accumulation of the kind of knowledge and judgment that can only be acquired through sustained engagement with real problems.

The modern Bar, responding to genuine market pressures, has allowed the imperatives of branding to colonise territory that should be reserved for becoming. Aspiring barristers are encouraged to brand themselves before they have had the chance to understand who they are becoming. This is not simply a problem of timing; it is a problem of values, an implicit message that the appearance of certainty is more valuable than the reality of intellectual seriousness.

The Bar's finest advocates have almost always been characterised by a quality of mind that resists easy categorisation, a restlessness of intelligence, an ability to find connections across domains, a willingness to be genuinely surprised by what the law turns out to contain. That quality is cultivated through breadth of exposure and the freedom to be uncertain, not through the performance of early specialism. For as long as the application process continues to reward the performance over the substance, it will be selecting, at least in part, for precisely the wrong thing.

DISCLAIMER

All articles are written by members and reflect their personal political, economic, and social views. The Youth Bar Association does not restrict or censor submitted content but evaluates it solely based on quality, critical analysis, and adherence to publication standards.