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Access to the Bar

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This briefing paper was commissioned by the Northern Ireland Assembly's Justice Committee. It provides an overview of issues relevant to entry and training to the barrister profession, including comparisons across England and Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland.

This information is provided to Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in support of their duties, and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as professional legal advice, or as a substitute for it.

Key Points

- Pathways to becoming a barrister differ significantly across Northern Ireland, England and Wales, Scotland, and the Republic of Ireland, reflecting variations in governance, training structures, and regulatory oversight.
- The vocational stage of training is the most financially intensive across all jurisdictions, with substantial differences in course fees, funding availability, and scholarship provision.
- Rising living costs, accommodation shortages, and limited maintenance support have created financial pressures for students across the UK and Republic of Ireland, with implications for access, retention, and progression into professional training.
- Apprenticeship stages (pupillage or devilling) vary in structure and remuneration. England and Wales is the only jurisdiction with a mandatory minimum award, funded by the pupillage provider; Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Republic of Ireland do not require financial support for trainees.
- Data on academic qualifications, age, gender, scholarships, part-time employment and the subsidy scheme for pupils joining the Bar of Northern Ireland from 2019/2020 to 2024/2025 provide some insight into access. Data on socioeconomic background, disability and ethnicity demographics is limited in jurisdictions such as Northern Ireland and Scotland, constraining analysis of equity and access.
- Recent reviews in England and Wales and the Republic of Ireland highlight persistent barriers for candidates from less advantaged backgrounds, including financial constraints, educational disparities, and unequal access to professional networks.

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Introduction

Pathways to becoming a barrister in Northern Ireland, England and Wales, Scotland, and the Republic of Ireland differ due to variations in governance, training models, and entry requirements. While each jurisdiction follows a broadly similar structure - academic study, vocational training, and a period of supervised practice - the design, duration, and financial arrangements of these stages vary considerably.

The size of the profession varies markedly across jurisdictions. England and Wales have by far the largest cohort, with 18,141 practising barristers in 2024.¹ By comparison, the Republic of Ireland recorded 3,071 barristers in the same period,² while Scotland and Northern Ireland had much smaller but broadly similar numbers, at approximately 460 and 600 respectively.³

Concerns relating to access to the Bar have become increasingly prominent. Rising training costs, reductions in student support, unpaid apprenticeship stages, geographical constraints, and disparities in educational background all influence who is able to enter and progress within the legal profession.⁴ At present, no single source synthesises these systems or compares their implications for accessibility.

This briefing provides a comparative overview of access to the Bar in Northern Ireland, situating it within the wider context of England and Wales, Scotland, and the Republic of Ireland. It examines financial pressures, regulatory frameworks, training pathways, demographic patterns, and scholarship provision, drawing on available data and published research.

¹ Bar Standards Board, [Statistics on practising barristers: Total Barristers in Practice](#) (2025)

² 'Now over 15,000 practising solicitors and barristers'. *Irish Legal News*, 10 July 2025

³ L Donnery, [How Many Lawyers Are There in the UK? A Breakdown of Legal Professionals Across Jurisdictions](#) (2025)

⁴ E Cooke, 'Navigating Entry to, and Barriers Within, the Legal Profession: Exploring Institutional and Structural Deficiencies Within the Legal Aid Field'. *The Hidden World of the Legal Aid Lawyer* (2025), p72-86

1 Overview of the Financial Landscape for Students

Across Northern Ireland, England and Wales, Scotland, and the Republic of Ireland, students face increasing financial pressures driven by rising living costs, accommodation shortages, and limited maintenance support. These pressures can affect access to higher education, participation in vocational training, and the ability to undertake unpaid or low-paid apprenticeship stages.

Although the scale and nature of financial hardship vary across jurisdictions, common themes include:

- rising rental costs in major university centres⁵
- increased reliance on part-time work⁶
- food and energy insecurity⁷
- insufficient maintenance support relative to living costs⁸

These pressures have implications for access to the Bar, particularly where vocational training and pupillage/devilling are concentrated in high-cost urban areas.

⁵ NUS Wales, [58% of Welsh students are skipping meals due to rising accommodation costs](#) (2024)

⁶ N McConaghy, [NUS-USI launch Cost of Living Report](#) (2024)

⁷ J Butler, [National Student Money Survey 2025 – Results](#) (2025)

⁸ N Hillman, [Maintenance loan in England now covers just half of students' costs](#) (2025)

2 Overview of the Bar across the UK and Republic of Ireland

Across the four jurisdictions examined in this briefing, “the Bar” refers to the body of qualified barristers (or advocates in Scotland) authorised to provide specialist advocacy and legal advice. Entry typically requires completion of:

1. an academic stage
2. a vocational training stage
3. admission or “Call” by the relevant professional body
4. a period of supervised practice (pupillage or devilling)

Although the broad structure is similar, the governance arrangements, training requirements, and financial obligations differ significantly across jurisdictions.

2.1 The Inns of Court and Equivalent Bodies

Professional associations play a central role in the education, admission, and regulation of barristers:

- Northern Ireland: The Inn of Court of Northern Ireland
- England and Wales: Four Inns of Court (Gray’s Inn, Lincoln’s Inn, Inner Temple, Middle Temple)
- Scotland: The Faculty of Advocates (functionally equivalent, though not termed an “Inn”).
- Republic of Ireland: The Honourable Society of King’s Inns

These bodies can provide:

- admission to the profession
- qualifying sessions or training
- scholarships and financial support
- professional standards and disciplinary oversight

Their influence varies by jurisdiction, but each plays a significant role in shaping access to the Bar.

3 Framework Governing Entry into the Profession

Entry into the barrister profession is shaped by distinct institutional and statutory arrangements. While all jurisdictions follow a two-stage professional training model (vocational training followed by supervised practice, otherwise known as pupillage/devilling), the organisations responsible for oversight differ substantially. Below, each jurisdiction's framework is summarised.

Table 1: Professional Training Models for Entry to the Bar in England & Wales, Scotland and Republic of Ireland

Jurisdiction	Academic Stage	Vocational Training Stage	Pupillage and Call
Northern Ireland	Complete a qualifying law degree – 2:1 classification minimum	Complete the Bar Post-graduate Diploma in Professional Legal Studies at IPLS	Called to the Bar Complete a 12-month pupillage period (pupillage secured through IPLS and the Bar of Northern Ireland)
England and Wales	Complete a qualifying law degree - 2:2 classification minimum	Join an Inn of Court Complete vocational training through an Authorised Education and Training Organisation (AETOS) Complete the required qualifying sessions with their Inn	Called to the Bar and complete a 12-month pupillage (involves a competitive process to secure a pupillage spot)
Scotland	Complete a qualifying law degree	Complete a Diploma in Professional Legal Practice (PEAT 1)	PEAT 2: Two-year solicitor traineeship Apply to become an Intranant (candidate to train as an advocate) within the Faculty of Advocates Complete a 9-month devilling period Admitted as a full member of the Faculty of Advocates
Republic of Ireland	Complete a qualifying law degree	Complete the BL Degree at King's Inns	Called to the Bar and complete a 12-month devilling

3.1 Northern Ireland

3.1.1 Governance Structure

The Bar of Northern Ireland is an independent referral Bar governed by its Constitution.⁹ Key bodies involved in entry to the profession include:¹⁰

- Institute of Professional Legal Studies (IPLS) – delivers vocational training
- The Inn of Court of Northern Ireland – responsibility for admission and Call to the Bar
- Bar Council of Northern Ireland – regulates professional practice and pupillage

3.1.2 Vocational Training

Within Northern Ireland, recognised law degrees are delivered by Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University. Upon obtaining a recognised law degree, prospective barristers must apply to IPLS to pursue their 12-month vocational training diploma (Post-Graduate Diploma in Professional Legal Studies). Students from other jurisdictions may apply to the IPLS so long as they hold a recognised degree.¹¹

3.1.3 Pupillage Rules

Once vocational training has been completed, barristers are Called to the Bar and must undergo a 12-month pupillage period. Pupillage is divided into two six-month stages. Regulations specify supervision requirements, assessment standards and required competencies (advocacy, ethics, research, case

⁹ The Bar of Northern Ireland, [Constitution](#) (2026)

¹⁰ The Bar of Northern Ireland, [Governing Bodies](#) (2026)

¹¹ R Kavanagh, [Entry and training for barristers in Northern Ireland](#) (2023)

preparation). The Bar maintains a list of approved Pupil Masters and monitors compliance.¹²

3.1.4 Financial Arrangements

Northern Ireland does not impose a statutory minimum pupillage award. Pupils are generally unpaid, and financial support is at the discretion of the Pupil Master. While pupillage is typically unpaid, financial support mechanisms are available to assist new barristers without prior employment, including the subsidisation of Bar Library fees.

The Bar's subsidy policy supports new entrants with little prior income, helping ensure access to the profession for those of limited financial means. It reduces Bar Library fees for eligible members for up to the first seven years of practice. At maximum support, fees start at around £500 and gradually rise to the full subscription (c. £5,356) by year 7, amounting to an approximate £28,000 saving overall. Fee levels range from £412 (Year 1) to £4,093 (Year 7).¹³

Eligibility is based on income over the previous seven tax years. For each year income exceeds the threshold (£24,525), one year of subsidy is removed. For example, exceeding the threshold in two years results in entry at Year 3 fee level.

The scheme aims to promote access, fairness between generations, diversity, and sustainability of the Bar, while ensuring support is targeted at those who need it and remains proportionate and manageable. Members entering at higher fee levels may receive earlier access to certain benefits, such as desk allocation.

¹² The Bar of Northern Ireland, [Becoming a Practising Barrister](#) (2026)

¹³ Correspondence between RalSe and the Bar of Northern Ireland (24 June 2026)

3.2 England and Wales

3.2.1 Governance Structure

The right to admit individuals to the Bar is held by the four Inns of Court, which oversee: admission of student members, qualifying sessions, Call to the Bar and scholarships and professional development.

Regulatory oversight is provided by the Bar Standards Board (BSB) under the Legal Services Act 2007. The BSB regulates academic requirements, vocational training, pupillage and authorisation of training providers (AETOs).

3.2.2 Vocational Training

Universities deliver qualifying law degrees and recognised conversion courses. The BSB sets academic standards, while the Inns retain responsibility for Call and qualifying sessions. The 12-month vocational training period is provided by Authorised Education and Training Organisations (AETOS - universities delivering the Bar Course).

There are currently 10 AETOS operating in England and Wales, authorised to deliver one or all components of vocational training.¹⁴ To enroll on vocational training, students must be a member of one of the Inns of Court, and during vocational training, attend qualifying sessions with their Inn of Court.¹⁵

3.2.3 Pupillage Rules

Securing pupillage in England and Wales is highly competitive, with approximately 500-600 pupils commencing each year. The Pupillage Gateway serves as the central advertising platform for AETOs (such as chambers), and its use for advertising is mandated by the BSB, although participation in recruitment is optional. Currently, around 60% of AETOs use the Gateway for recruitment, with others operating independent selection processes.¹⁶

¹⁴ Bar Standards Board, [2024-25 AETO Factsheet for Vocational Component](#) (2024)

¹⁵ Bar Standards Board, [Vocational component of Bar training](#) (2025)

¹⁶ The Bar Council, [Pupillage Gateway Report 2024/25](#) (2026), p3

The 12-month pupillage component of training is comprised by:

1. First Six (six months of non-practising)
2. Second Six (six months of practising)

During pupillage, AETOs must provide structured supervision and assessment aligned with the Professional Statement for Barristers. England and Wales is the only jurisdiction with a mandatory minimum pupillage award.¹⁷

Pupillage funding is governed by BSB rules, which require chambers or BSB entities to pay pupils a minimum monthly award during both the non-practising and practising periods, alongside reimbursement of reasonable expenses. During the practising period, payments may be offset against earnings received by the pupil. Chambers are prohibited from reclaiming these amounts (except in cases of misconduct), and self-employed barristers must pay pupils for work that merits remuneration unless this is already covered by the pupillage award.¹⁸ The average pupillage award is approximately:

- £25,863 (London, 2026)
- £23,504 (outside London, 2026)

3.3 Scotland

3.3.1 Governance Structure

The Faculty of Advocates is the independent professional body regulating advocates. Its authority derives from longstanding constitutional arrangements rather than statute.

¹⁷ Bar Standards Board, [Pupillage / work-based learning component of Bar training](#) (2025)

¹⁸ Bar Standards Board, [The BSB Handbook - Version 5.0](#), p53

The Faculty oversees:

- Admission of intrants
- Professional conduct
- Education and training
- Disciplinary processes

3.3.2 Training Pathway: PEAT and Devilling

The Scottish route to the Bar typically follows qualification as a solicitor before entry to the Faculty of Advocates. Training is structured through the Professional Education and Training (PEAT) framework:¹⁹

- PEAT 1: Diploma in Professional Legal Practice, delivered by accredited universities. Typically, a 2:1 or 2:2 depending on Diploma provider is required for entrance onto the diploma.
- PEAT 2: A two-year traineeship within a law firm, leading to qualification as a solicitor.

Only after completing PEAT 1 and PEAT 2 do candidates usually proceed to:

- Devilling: a nine-month period of supervised training administered by the Faculty of Advocates. Devilling includes training in advocacy, ethics, drafting, and research. Intrants must meet Faculty assessment standards before admission.²⁰

3.3.3 Devilling Rules and Financial Arrangements

Devilling lasts approximately nine months and is unpaid. Devilmasters are not required to provide financial support, and available scholarships are limited and highly competitive.

¹⁹ Faculty of Advocates, [Investigating Becoming an Advocate](#)

²⁰ Faculty of Advocates, [Becoming an 'Intrant' \(A Candidate to Train as an Advocate\)](#)

As most entrants have already qualified and practised as solicitors, they typically enter devilling with prior professional experience; however, the absence of remuneration during this period remains a significant financial consideration.

3.4 Republic of Ireland

3.4.1 Governance Structure

The Irish Bar operates within a dual institutional framework:

- The Honourable Society of King's Inns – responsible for education, training, and Call to the Bar²¹
- The Bar of Ireland – professional body for practising barristers, administering devilling and Law Library membership²²

Regulatory oversight is provided by the Legal Services Regulatory Authority (LSRA) under the Legal Services Regulation Act 2015.

3.4.2 Vocational Training

Entry requires successful completion of the Barrister-at-Law (BL) Degree at King's Inns. Candidates typically hold a recognised law degree, though non-law graduates may complete the Diploma in Legal Studies before progressing. The BL programme focuses on practical legal skills, advocacy, ethics, and professional responsibility.²³

3.4.3 Devilling Rules and Financial Arrangements

Devilling lasts one year, with an optional second year. It is unpaid, and Masters are not required to provide financial support. Scholarships exist but are limited.

²¹ King's Inns, [Degree of Barrister-at-Law](#)

²² Law Library, [The Bar of Ireland](#)

²³ Law Library, [Becoming a Barrister](#)

Trainees must obtain professional indemnity insurance and pay Law Library membership fees.

4 Accessibility

Accessibility to the Bar varies significantly across the four jurisdictions, shaped by differences in training capacity, financial arrangements, demographic patterns, and the availability of data. While each jurisdiction follows a broadly similar pathway, the level of competition, financial burden, and transparency differs, influencing who is able to enter and progress within the profession.

4.1 Northern Ireland

4.1.1 Vocational Training

Access to the Bar of Northern Ireland is constrained by the small annual intake to the IPLS Bar Course and the limited number of pupillages available. Although the Bar comprises over 600 practising barristers,²⁴ only around 20 trainees are admitted to the IPLS Bar Course each year.²⁵

Entry requirements include:

- an upper second-class honours degree (2:1) or equivalent
- payment of course fees (approximately £10,800)
- successful completion of a competitive entrance examination

Selection is based on exam performance and academic achievement. Data provided by the Bar of Northern Ireland on Call information suggests that 117 candidates commenced vocational training between 2019/20 and 2024/25, averaging 17 students a year. Given the small cohort size, these figures should be interpreted with caution. This period also covered the covid-19 pandemic during which the Bar continued to admit the same level of entrants and fee levels were reduced for those in the early part of their careers. Demographic characteristics for these 117 suggest:

²⁴ Queen's University, Belfast, [Information Booklet for Applicants for commencement in September 2026](#) (2026), p7

²⁵ Submission by the Bar of Northern Ireland to the Committee for Justice (3 October 2025)

- 50% were female
- Age ranges were 23 – 63 years, with a mean age of 29
- 55% obtained their first degree from QUB, 25% from Ulster University
- 53% obtained a 1st class degree at first degree, 38% a 2:1 and 10 classifications were unknown
- 58% of students obtained part-time employment during pupillage
- Ethnicity data was not available

Award attainment appears notable:

- 3 students received the Lord Kerr scholarship
- No students received the Bar scholarship (this scholarship in place from September 2025)
- 27 students received the JPB Maxwell scholarship
- 24 students received the Bencher's Advocacy Prize
- 32 students received the Inn of Court Prize

4.1.2 Pupillage

Following vocational training, candidates complete a 12-month pupillage under the supervision of an approved Pupil Master. Approximately 20 pupils undertake this stage annually. Pupillage is organised through the Bar Council, all 20 graduates of IPLS are guaranteed a pupil master, as such demographics in 4.1.1 also reflect pupils Called in 2026.

The Bar of Northern Ireland's data also tracks entrants by level of financial support (full or partial fee subsidy) and shows retention over time, indicating that four barristers from each of the 2020–2022 cohorts have since left the profession, while no departures have yet been recorded for cohorts from 2023 onwards.

Early financial support provided by the Bar Council, for new entrants to the Bar, is structured through a graduated subsidy system, which reduces Bar Library fees over the first seven years of practice. This model is designed to ease the financial burden of pupillage, although it does not provide direct income, and pupillage itself remains unpaid. Previous employment can result in fees not being subsidised.

The 2025 cohort illustrates the operation of this system clearly. Of the 23 individuals called to the Bar:²⁶

- 20 entrants received a Year 1 subsidy, representing the most generous level of support
- 1 entrant began on a Year 3 subsidy, reflecting a later and less beneficial entry into the scheme
- 2 entrants received no subsidy

Those starting at Year 1 progress through a tapering structure from Years 1 to 7, receiving decreasing levels of fee relief over time. The Bar has estimated that this can amount to a total financial benefit of approximately £28,000 over the full period for those entering at the earliest stage.²⁷

While the high proportion of entrants receiving maximum initial support is notable, the scheme primarily offsets professional fees rather than addressing the absence of income during pupillage. As such, although the subsidy system provides meaningful assistance, it does not fully mitigate the broader financial pressures associated with entry to practice.

4.1.3 Data Limitations

While data was obtained through communications with the Bar of Northern Ireland, the absence of published data from the Bar of Northern Ireland and

²⁶ Correspondence between RalSe and the Bar of Northern Ireland (24 June 2026)

²⁷ As cited immediately above

IPLS limits open analysis of data. Additionally, socioeconomic background, disability, and ethnicity demographics were not provided. This restricts the ability to assess barriers to access or monitor trends over time.

4.2 England and Wales

Access to the profession is shaped by progression through the vocational stage and the highly competitive pupillage process.

4.2.1 Vocational Training

Between July 2024 and June 2025, 2,445 students enrolled on Bar training courses delivered by AETOs. Entry requirements generally include a degree with at least a 2:2 classification. Average costs of enrolling on AETOS are approximately £15,831 but can exceed £19,100 for UK students and £20,200 for overseas students.²⁸

BSB data shows a strong correlation between degree classification and pupillage outcomes:²⁹

- candidates with a 2:2 are significantly less likely to obtain pupillage.
- candidates with a First or 2:1 progress more quickly and with higher success rates of obtaining pupillage and passing the vocational training stage on their first attempt.

4.2.2 Pupillage

In 2024/25, 683 positions were advertised on the Pupillage Gateway (the main pupillage recruitment tool for barristers). The Pupillage Gateway report (2024/25) suggests that of the 3,912 applicants on the Pupillage Gateway, only 287 offers were made to secure pupillage.³⁰

Earlier research has identified that barriers to securing pupillage exist in England and Wales. The pupillage selection process is thought to “discriminate

²⁸ Bar Standards Board, [Bar Training 2024: Statistics by Course Provider](#) (2025), p9

²⁹ As cited immediately above, p11

³⁰ The Bar Council, [Pupillage Gateway Report 2024/25](#) (2026), p12

against applicants from less privileged or minority ethnic backgrounds, as well as those applicants who were older or had a disability”.³¹

Sutton Trust research also highlights that although 1% of UK undergraduates attend Oxford or Cambridge, 78% of top barristers and 74% of the senior judiciary are Oxbridge-educated.³²

More recent research suggests that, among those commencing pupillage in 2024:³³

- 62% were female
- 28% were Black or from an ethnic minority background
- 22% reported a disability
- 10% had caring responsibilities

4.3 Scotland

Data on access to the Scottish Bar is limited, as the Faculty of Advocates does not routinely publish demographic or socioeconomic information. Because PEAT 1 is delivered by multiple universities and PEAT 2 is professional traineeship, consolidated data on enrolment numbers and student/trainee demographics are not currently available. Attempts were made to engage with the Faculty of Advocates to obtain demographic information on those undertaking devilling, but no response was received.

4.4 Republic of Ireland

The Republic of Ireland published a comprehensive review of Bar accessibility in 2024, providing the most detailed dataset outside England and Wales.

³¹ M Kotecha et al. [Barriers to Training for the Bar](#) (2017), p6

³² P Kirby, [The Education Backgrounds of the UK Professional Elite](#) (2016), p4

³³ The Bar Council, [Pupil Survey 2024](#) (2024), p3

4.4.1 Vocational Training

In 2024, 145 applicants sat the entrance exam for the BL degree course, 117 (81%) passed the exam and were offered a place on the BL degree: 120 students commenced the degree in 2024.³⁴

Of the 120 students who commenced the BL degree in 2024:

- 57% were female, 43% male
- 54% were aged 30 or under, 46% were aged 31 or over,
- 62% had an approved qualification while 38% had the King's Inns Diploma in Legal Studies

Based on LSRA reports, progress is evident across a number of areas, including the development and expansion of access initiatives and collaborative efforts to address barriers in early-career practice.³⁵

4.4.2 Devilling

A total of 82 new Law Library members commenced devilling in 2024, 53 were Called to the Bar in 2024 and 29 had deferred devilling from earlier Calls (2013-2023).³⁶

- 48% were female, 52% male
- 59% were 30 or under, 41% were 31 or over

³⁴ LSRA, [Pathways to the Professions](#) (2024), p27

³⁵ LSRA, [Breaking Down Barriers Implementation Plan: Progress Report 3](#) (2026), p 8-17

³⁶ As cited in footnote 35, p30

5 Scholarship and Prize Availability

Scholarship and prize provision varies significantly across the four jurisdictions. England and Wales operate the most extensive and financially substantial system, driven by the Inns of Court. Northern Ireland, Scotland, and the Republic of Ireland offer more limited or primarily merit-based awards, with fewer widening-participation schemes and lower overall financial value. These differences have implications for access, particularly for candidates without family financial support.

5.1 Northern Ireland

Scholarship and prize availability in Northern Ireland is concentrated at the IPLS vocational training stage. Student Finance NI does not cover IPLS fees (approximately £10,800), meaning students must rely on scholarships, savings, family support, or hardship schemes.³⁷

5.1.1 Scholarships

- J.P.B. Maxwell Scholarship: Awarded to the top five Bar trainees based on aggregate examination performance. Recipients must intend to practice at the Bar of Northern Ireland for at least 12 months following Call. Scholarships range from £2,000 - £12,500. In addition, bursaries of £750 are awarded to trainees placed sixth to tenth.
- Lord Kerr Scholarship: Awarded annually to one Queen's University Belfast law graduate from a widening-participation background. Covers full IPLS Bar Course fees (£10,800 in 2025/26).
- Bar of Northern Ireland IPLS Scholarship: Part of the Bar's widening-access initiative. Open to IPLS Bar Course trainees from under-represented backgrounds. Covers full fees (£10,800 in 2025/26).
- Centenary Bursary Scheme (Solicitors' route): Supports access to the solicitors' profession for individuals from less advantaged backgrounds.

³⁷ Queen's University, Belfast, [Scholarships at the Institute of Professional Legal Studies](#)

Covers full IPLS Solicitor Course fees (£10,800) for two trainees annually.

5.1.2 Prizes awarded at graduation

Annual prizes are awarded by the Board of Examiners and presented at graduation. For Bar trainees, these include subject and performance-based awards. These awards are typically symbolic or of relatively low monetary value. Examples include:³⁸

- Benchers' Advocacy Prize
 - £1,000 (winner)
 - £750 (runner-up)
 - £500 (two finalists)
- Eoin Higgins Prize
- Inn of Court Prize
- Martin McBirney Memorial Prize
- Fox Fund Prize
- Judge Corinne Philpott QC Memorial Prize
- Megaw Gift Fund Prize
- Williamson Trust Fund Prize

Prizes can also be awarded based on exam performances, of which Bar and Solicitor students are eligible:

- The Pat Finucane Prize for Criminal Procedure – Indictment
- The Elliott Duffy Garrett Prize for Company Law
- MKB Law Prize for Business Law
- The Tughans Prize in Litigation
- The Tyrone Prize
- The O'Reilly Stewart Prize for Clinical Negligence
- The Directorate of Legal Services Prize for Family Law
- The Harry Coll Prize for Tribunals

³⁸ Submission by the Bar of Northern Ireland to the Committee for Justice (3 October 2025), p13

- The Cleaver Fulton Rankin Prize for Wills in memory of Edward Bergins
- The Denis Kearney memorial prize

5.2 England and Wales

England and Wales have the largest and most financially significant scholarship system across the four jurisdictions. Student Finance England does not cover vocational Bar training, so scholarships, primarily from the Inns of Court, play a central role in supporting access.

5.2.1 Vocational Training Costs

The average cost of Bar training delivered by AETOs ranges from £12,900 to £19,100 for UK students, depending on provider, location, and course structure.³⁹

5.2.2 Inns of Court Scholarships

Collectively, the Inns award £6–£7 million per year in scholarships, bursaries, and prizes.⁴⁰ Awards are typically based on merit, with financial need influencing final amounts.

5.2.2.1 Gray's Inn⁴¹

- Provides over £1.5 million annually in scholarships and awards
- Awards 100+ Bar Course scholarships each year
- Baseline award: £5,000 with means-tests uplifts
- Maximum awards can reach £25,000
- Offers up to 35 GDL scholarships (£2,500–£15,000)
- Additional support includes pupillage scholarships and internship funding

³⁹ Bar Standards Board, [Bar Training 2025: Statistics by Course Provider](#) (2025), p9

⁴⁰ Law Careers, [Inns of Court Scholarships](#) (2026)

⁴¹ Law Careers, [Gray's Inn](#) (2026)

5.2.2.2 Inner Temple⁴²⁴³

- Will award over £1.8 million in scholarships in 2026
- Approximately 138 bar course awards/scholarships ranging from £3,000 to £22,000
- Up to 30 GDL scholarships (up to £13,000)
- Additional support includes disability grants and internship funding

5.2.2.3 Lincoln's Inn⁴⁴

- Provides over £2 million annually in scholarships and awards
- In 2025, 127 Bar Course students received scholarships
- Awards are means tested, with a maximum of £21,000
- Applicants typically apply in the autumn of their final undergraduate year

5.2.2.4 Middle Temple⁴⁵

- Awards approximately £1.5 million in scholarships (2025)
- In 2025, the highest scholarship award was £28,000 with a median award of £10,250
- Operates an Emergency Assistance Fund for students and pupils experiencing severe unforeseen financial hardship, including those in publicly funded practice areas with low pupillage awards

5.3 Scotland

Like Northern Ireland, scholarship provision in Scotland is limited and primarily merit-based.

⁴² Law Careers, [Inner Temple](#) (2026)

⁴³ The Inner Temple, [Bar Course Scholarships](#) (2026)

⁴⁴ Law Careers, [Lincoln's Inn](#) (2026)

⁴⁵ Law Careers, [Middle Temple](#) (2026)

5.3.1 PEAT 1 (Diploma in Professional Legal Practice)

Tuition fees are approximately £11,943, depending on the university.⁴⁶ The Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) provides a tuition fee loan and a non-income-assessed living-cost loan for full-time students. This makes Scotland the only jurisdiction where the vocational stage is fully eligible for public student finance.

5.3.2 PEAT 2 (Solicitor traineeship)

PEAT 2 takes the form of a two-year paid traineeship within a law firm, during which trainee solicitors earn a salary rather than pay tuition fees. Salaries vary depending on the firm and location but are typically set in line with Law Society of Scotland recommendations or market rates.

As a result, Scotland differs from other jurisdictions in that trainees can earn an income during this stage of training, reducing the immediate financial burden prior to progression to devilling, which remains unpaid.

5.3.3 Devilling

Devilling is unpaid, and Devilmasters are not required to provide financial support. Scholarships are available through the Faculty of Advocates and external bodies, but awards are limited, competition is high and values are modest relative to living costs. Scotland's financial support system is therefore strong at PEAT 1 but minimal at devilling.⁴⁷

5.4 Republic of Ireland

Scholarship provision in the Republic of Ireland is modest relative to training costs.

The BL Degree costs approximately €13,500–€14,500 per year.⁴⁸ Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) provides postgraduate funding for full-time BL

⁴⁶ University of Glasgow, Costs estimated from the [Diploma in Professional Legal Practice](#)

⁴⁷ Faculty of Advocates, [The Devilling Process \(Training as an Advocate\)](#)

⁴⁸ King's Inns, [Course Fees & Other Charges](#) (2026)

students only, including fee grants (partial or full) and maintenance grants (means-tested). Students must pay fees upfront, with reimbursement issued once SUSI processes the grant.⁴⁹

5.4.1 Scholarships

King's Inns offers a small number of competitive scholarships, including:⁵⁰

- The Denham Fellowship (for candidates from socio-economically disadvantaged background)
- The McCarthy Bursary
- The Walsh Scholarship
- Various subject-specific prizes

Award values vary and are generally limited relative to the overall cost of training and devilling.

5.4.2 Devilling

Devilling is unpaid, and trainees must also pay Law Library membership fees and Professional indemnity insurance. Scholarships for devilling are limited, and financial support is not guaranteed.

⁴⁹ King's Inns, [Bursaries, Grants and Prizes](#)

⁵⁰ As cited in footnote 46, p22

6 Barriers to Access

This section synthesises evidence across the four jurisdictions to identify the structural, financial, educational, and cultural barriers that shape access to the Bar. While each jurisdiction has distinct training pathways and regulatory frameworks, financial support emerges as a significant cross-cutting constraint, particularly where vocational training is expensive and pupillage or devilling is unpaid.

6.1 Structural Barriers

Across all jurisdictions, the number of available training places remains significantly lower than the number of aspiring entrants.

Key structural constraints include:

- Small annual intakes to vocational training, especially in Northern Ireland and Scotland
- Bottlenecks at supervised practice, with pupillage/devilling places limiting entry to practice (particularly in England and Wales)
- Geographical concentration of training in Belfast, London, Edinburgh and Dublin

These structural pressures interact with financial barriers, as candidates with fewer resources may be unable to relocate, self-fund unpaid training, or absorb the costs of repeated applications.

6.2 Financial Barriers

Financial barriers are among the most significant obstacles to accessing the Bar across all four jurisdictions. These arise from tuition fees, living costs, unpaid training periods, and uneven availability of scholarships.

6.2.1 Northern Ireland

- The IPLS Bar Course has limited full-fee scholarships, and prizes can be assumed to be low monetary value, offering limited financial relief.
- Pupillage is unfunded, requiring candidates to self-support during their first year of practice.
- Belfast's rising living costs further compound financial pressures.

6.2.2 England and Wales

- Although the Inns of Court provide £6-7 million annually in scholarships (typically £10,000-£22,000+), competition is intense.
- AETOS fees remain high, and many students receive no financial support.
- Pupillage is funded, but awards vary widely: those outside commercial sets may receive only the minimum awards, which may not cover London living costs.

6.2.3 Scotland

- Devilling is unpaid, and Faculty scholarships are modest, leaving most devils reliant on savings or external employment.
- No full-fee scholarships exist for the Faculty examinations.

6.2.4 Republic of Ireland

- The BL degree is expensive, and while King's Inns offers scholarships (typically €2,000 - €12,000), most students self-fund.
- Although SUSI may reimburse approved tuition fees, students are required to meet the full cost upfront before any grant payment is released.
- Devilling is unpaid, and no formal financial support exists for pupils.
- Dublin's high cost of living intensifies financial strain.

6.3 Socio-economic barriers

While data was limited for Northern Ireland, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland regarding socio-economic backgrounds, reports from England and Wales suggest socio-economic background remains one of the strongest predictors of access to the Bar.

Evidence shows:

- Over-representation of privately educated candidates.
- Lower success rates for first-generation university students or those obtaining a 2:1 and below at first degree.

Where vocational training is expensive and pupillage/devilling is unpaid, socio-economic disadvantage and underperforming at first degree becomes a structural barrier rather than an incidental one.

6.4 Data Gaps and Transparency Issues

Data availability varies significantly across jurisdictions:

- Northern Ireland and Scotland publish no demographic or socio-economic data.
- Where data was obtained for Northern Ireland, socioeconomic status, disability and ethnicity demographics were not available.
- England and Wales provide the most comprehensive data, but gaps remain.
- Republic of Ireland publishes detailed BL and Call data but limited socio-economic indicators.

These gaps limit the ability to fully assess the impact of financial and structural barriers.

7 Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that, while the Bar in Northern Ireland, England and Wales, Scotland, and the Republic of Ireland operates within distinct regulatory and training frameworks, access is shaped by a common set of interlocking barriers. Across all four jurisdictions, limited training places and bottlenecks at the point of supervised practice create a highly competitive environment in which success is not determined solely by merit, particularly in England and Wales. These structural limitations are compounded by the geographic centralisation of training and opportunities, which disproportionately disadvantage candidates unable to relocate.

Financial barriers emerge as the most consistently significant obstacle. The high cost of vocational training, coupled with unpaid or poorly remunerated periods of pupillage or devilling, places a substantial burden on aspiring barristers. Although some financial supports exist, they are unevenly distributed and insufficient to offset the overall cost for many candidates. In jurisdictions where financial support is more limited, such as Northern Ireland, Scotland, and the Republic of Ireland, the expectation of self-funding further entrenches inequality.

Socio-economic background remains a powerful determinant of access, particularly evident in the data from England and Wales. Where entry pathways require significant upfront investment and periods without income, individuals from less advantaged backgrounds face systemic disadvantages. Educational attainment, particularly at first-degree level, also interacts with these financial constraints, reinforcing existing inequalities rather than mitigating them.

Finally, the absence of consistent and comprehensive data across jurisdictions significantly limits the ability to evaluate and address these issues. Without transparent reporting on socio-economic background and outcomes, policymakers and professional bodies are constrained in their ability to design effective interventions.