



Teach First: Different class

Some recruiters may still question the relevance of teaching skills for the legal profession, but the success of the Teach First scheme is leading many to think again.

It seemed an odd place to start a career in law. Student Steve Costello was standing in front of a roomful of students at a tough inner-city school in Hackney, preparing to teach his first class. And he was extremely nervous.

"They were testing you out," he recalls. "One or two kids would say a few cheeky things. The first lesson wasn't too bad – after that they try to turn the screw."

That was in 2005. Fast-forward three years and the 26-year-old has now secured a training contract at magic circle firm Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer.

Costello is one of a small but growing number of students using the Teach First programme to launch careers in law. The scheme takes academic high-achievers and sends them to underperforming schools for two years after they graduate from university. The participants gain vital life skills and a seriously impressive CV, while inner-city youngsters benefit from exposure to some of the country's brightest minds.

"You get six weeks of training and then you have 30 kids sat in front of you.

No other graduate scheme gives you such responsibility from day one," says Costello, as he reflects on his unusual path to one of the UK's top law firms.

In his two years at Cardinal Pole Roman Catholic School, Costello – now an ambassador for the programme – had to make some tough decisions. It is something that will serve him well in his career as a lawyer.

So far, only a handful of law students have completed the Teach First programme in the UK, but law firms are starting to take notice. Freshfields head of UK trainee recruitment Deborah Dalgleish says: "Teach First candidates are distinguished by an ability to swim rather than sink when dropped in the deep end and to not give up easily."

Tim Jones, London managing partner at Freshfields, thinks Teach First candidates also tend to pick up skills that will enable them to help more junior colleagues in the workplace.

"Mentoring and appraising skills are at a premium in law firms. A lot of our partners aren't very good at it – they should be a lot better," he says.

Like Freshfields, Allen & Overy (A&O) and CMS Cameron McKenna have also recently hired Teach First graduates. Tom Evans is a trainee at A&O, while Odette Orleans is soon to begin a training contract at Camerons.

"Of the [Teach First] people we've interviewed, their presentation and networking skills are much more developed than those of other candidates," says Vivienne Ball, head of recruitment at Camerons.

Susan Hazledine, partner in charge of graduate recruitment at A&O, adds: "The Teach First - programme develops many of the qualities that we look for in our future lawyers – excellent communication skills and creativity, but with a down-to-earth approach and a readiness to take on new challenges."

US model

Teach First launched in the UK in 2002 and is based on the phenomenally successful Teach for America scheme, which has started the careers of more than a thousand lawyers in the US.

Costello is certain he would not be where he is today without the programme. He studied economics at the University of Manchester before signing up for Teach First in the summer of 2005.

A year into the scheme he applied and was accepted to several vacation placements at law firms. This came several years after the majority of law students take this step, with most applying for summer placements during their penultimate year of university.

Dagleish admits that she would not have considered Costello had it not been for Teach First. The firm usually only accepts applications from law students at the end of their penultimate year.

"Because they're committed to teach for two years," she explains, "we're happy to accept applications from Teach First candidates after they've graduated."

With more students wanting to wait until the end of university before making major decisions about their careers, Teach First can offer a more considered route into law. The two-year teaching break fits neatly between graduation and taking the LPC, allowing students to apply for training contracts later than usual. This was the approach taken by Costello and other successful candidates.

So why do not more students and potential employers use the scheme? So far only A&O, Camerons, Freshfields and legal insurer DAS have taken on Teach First alumni.

Perhaps recruiters have yet to realise the benefits of this kind of experience to a legal career. Costello reveals that when he was interviewed for training places law firms would question the relevance of teaching skills to the legal profession.

"They used to say things like, 'you're a teacher – you're too nice for law'. But it's not about being nice or not, it's about being professional and dealing with stressful situations," explains Costello.

But that could be changing as partners come to realise the value of experience gained outside the law.

"I've always admired teachers who go into a new class and take control," says Freshfields' Jones. "It's not dissimilar to having to take the lead in a meeting." Most students apply for the Teach First programme in their final year of university, but competition for places is fierce.

"Eighty per cent of our teachers come from the top 15 universities, but we do take applications from any university," explains Teach First spokesman Philip Fearn. "The degree has to be at least a 2:1 – and that's just the start of it."

Leadership training

The next stage is to be screened before a gruelling day of assessments, including tasks such as teaching a five-minute mock lesson. Only then can applicants finally be accepted. No wonder only 300 students make the cut out of more than 2,000 applicants each year.

For the lucky few, training begins after graduation, with an intensive three-week programme run by universities in London, the North West and the Midlands. All the recruits then come together for three weeks of study at Canterbury Christ Church University before being sent to their respective schools.

Over the course of the two years teachers are given leadership training, including a short course at the Imperial College Business School. Each is also assigned a mentor – usually a successful member of whichever industry the teacher hopes to work in. Costello was put in touch with former Clifford Chance partner Rodney Short, now a legal consultant, who he describes as a "massive help".

But Teach First is not just about personal gain. For Costello the opportunity to help others was a major consideration in applying. He talks with passion about providing positive role models in areas of the country where there are few.

A day out at Clifford Chance during his second year gave pupils a glimpse of what can be achieved. Some of his students were even accepted on work experience placements at Freshfields – something Costello rates as one of his top achievements.

"These kids from Hackney were coming in and holding their own," he says. "It was amazing."

And for law firms it offers an opportunity to benefit from the input of lawyers with experience of life outside what can otherwise be an insular profession.

As Jones says: "One of the things we ask people in interviews is, 'What have you done that took you outside your comfort zone?' If they can demonstrate they have done that, it's an enormously important thing."

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