

Browne Jacobson officially launches REACH mentoring scheme to support aspiring Black lawyers

08 April 2024

Twenty aspiring Black lawyers have been offered the opportunity to kickstart their careers in the legal profession after signing up to a pioneering mentoring scheme run by Browne Jacobson.

The UK and Ireland law firm has officially launched its REACH (Race, Equality and Cultural Heritage) mentoring programme following a two-year pilot that provided support to 25 individuals, with 16 of those going on to secure employment within the business.

REACH aims to address the disproportionate under-representation of Black lawyers working in UK law firms, which stands at just 3%, by growing, nurturing and creating a sustainable pipeline of future Black talent.

Each of the 20 students, aged 16 and over, will enrol on a six-month programme in which they are paired with a mentor from Browne Jacobson or one of its partners.

Mentors will share their skills, knowledge and insights to help them gain an understanding of what it is like to work in the legal profession. The scheme also includes a two-week work experience placement in one of Browne Jacobson's seven offices.

Bridget Tatham, Partner at Browne Jacobson and REACH programme sponsor, said: "The legal profession should be accessible to everyone regardless of their race, gender or background. However, the reality is there are still many barriers that prevent individuals from under-represented communities, particularly those of African and Caribbean heritage, from pursuing a career in law.

"We know this is a problem that needs to be addressed, and as a business we are committed to building an inclusive and diverse pipeline of talent, where Black lawyers are not only provided with a level playing field but are equipped with tools and interventions to place them on an equitable and just footing with their peers. We want to provide opportunities for talented individuals of African and Caribbean heritage to thrive in their legal careers.

"This is why we designed a specific initiative to drive positive change in our REACH mentoring programme and our two-year pilot has delivered exceptional results. We are incredibly proud of the programme's success and the outstanding talented Black potential lawyers it has allowed the firm to recruit, retain and hopefully in due course promote. But we know there is a huge amount of work still to do.

"By officially launching the programme and collaborating with clients that are market leaders in their sectors, the aim is to scale up to further increase the positive impact we can achieve."

Solicitors Regulatory Authority (SRA) figures show that in 2015, the proportion of Black, Asian and UK minority ethnic lawyers working in law firms was 14%. This figure increased to 19% in 2023, but just 3% of all lawyers were Black the same year.

By partnering with universities and sixth form colleges, Browne Jacobson has been able to identify under-represented students in social mobility 'cold spots' and offer programme places to those who are most in need of the opportunity.

Since it was first piloted in March 2022, REACH has already increased the proportion of Black trainees at Browne Jacobson from none in 2016 to 31% in 2023 and 29% in 2024.

The firm has also audited recruitment processes to understand where applicants from Black backgrounds fell down and implemented impactful changes to create a fairer playing field.

These include anonymising training contract and apprenticeship applications, removing grade requirements to apply, deploying a contextualised recruitment system to gain a deeper appreciation of candidates' backgrounds, and introducing a 'second-look' policy that seeks to gain a deeper understanding of Black candidates from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Oliver Holmes, Head of Diversity and Inclusion at Browne Jacobson, added: "Our commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), in particular driving race equality, is one of our core values as a business – to be at the forefront of, and make a positive impact on, society's biggest issues. It also helps us to better serve the needs of our clients, as well as better represents the communities in which we operate.

"The legal profession is a notoriously competitive environment when it comes to attracting and retaining the best legal talent around. As such, our strategy's core objective has been to ensure we have a diverse and engaged talent pipeline from which we can recruit our work experience students, apprentices, legal assistants and, in due course, future junior solicitors."

REACH is the latest diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiative developed by Browne Jacobson, which has won numerous awards including being ranked the top law firm in the Social Mobility Foundation Index.

Its FAIRE (Fairer Access into Real Experience) scheme, which offers in-person and virtual work experience opportunities to candidates from lower socio-economic backgrounds, has engaged more than 30,500 students aged between 16 and 19 at a series of events since 2021.

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