

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

NEW RESEARCH ILLUSTRATES SCALE OF DIVERSITY CHALLENGE FOR PROFESSION AT SENIOR LEVEL

**LSB CHALLENGES PROFESSION TO EXTEND WORK ON WIDENING ACCESS TO
FACILITATE GREATER DIVERSITY AT THE TOP**

The Legal Services Board today publishes its [findings](#) on diversity in the legal profession. The research, undertaken by a team of senior researchers from across Westminster, Leeds and Leicester Universities, will be launched at a conference held at Westminster University.

The study centred on the experiences of women and BME practitioners, with a particular focus on perceived barriers to promotion to senior levels of the profession.

Seventy-seven current practitioners, prospective and former lawyers were interviewed along with a number of diversity officers from corporate law firms. The interviews investigated the reasons for these practitioners' career patterns, and the extent to which they were the product of individual choice or the culture, structure and institutions of the solicitors' profession and the Bar, or a mixture of the two.

Positively, many organisations have given considerable thought as to how to attract and retain well qualified diverse professionals. This focus has led to significant changes to recruitment processes, as well as the introduction of mentoring and other strategies to help develop a diverse workforce.

However, whilst findings suggest there have been important advances towards greater openness, it is clear that barriers to entry into, and promotion within, the profession still persist as a result of working practices and culture.

The most disappointing conclusion that can be drawn from the research is that some within the legal profession continue to make assumptions about ethnicity, gender and background that translate into barriers to success for their colleagues. Illustrations from participants included complaints over non-family friendly hours and maternity leave, the homogeneity that often arises from informal mentoring relationships, as well as some wider examples of racial stereotyping.

The findings also revealed barriers presented by the socio-economic background of prospective lawyers and current practitioners. The data suggests that, as a result of the preference of many employers for the graduates of 'old' universities, sections of society are filtered out of the profession.

The LSB, alongside its partners the Approved Regulators, has amongst its regulatory objectives the task of 'encouraging an independent, strong, diverse and effective legal profession'. The Board has set out, as part of its business plan, a range of measures to drive cross-sector action in this area.

Chief Executive of the Legal Services Board Chris Kenny said:

These findings highlight the scale of the challenge facing the legal profession when it comes to finally overcoming stubborn inequalities to retention and progression. Respondents have highlighted a range of structural and cultural factors that are responsible for increasing levels of inequality as you look higher up the workforce seniority ladder.

At entry level we have seen an unfinished revolution at widening access. Whilst continuing good progress made there, improving retention and progression is the next major diversity challenge.

For more information or interview requests please contact Craig Jones, Media and Public Affairs Manager at the LSB on craig.jones@legalservicesboard.org.uk or by calling 020 7271 0068 / 07702 428210

Notes for editors:

1. The full report can be found at http://www.legalservicesboard.org.uk/what_we_do/Research/index.htm
2. The findings will be launched at a free conference sponsored by the University of Westminster School of Law and the Legal Services Board:

Diversity in the Legal Profession: Barriers and Choices

LOCATION: Fyvie Hall, University of Westminster, 309 Regent St, London W1

DATE AND TIME: Wednesday 13 October -- 3.00pm to 6pm

3. Prof. Hilary Sommerlad (University of Leicester) was the Principal Investigator, alongside Dr Lisa Webley and Liz Duff (University of Westminster) and Dr. Daniel Muzio and Dr. Jennifer Tomlinson (University of Leeds). The University of Westminster acted as the lead institution.

4. The Legal Services Act ('The Act') provides for the creation of the Legal Services Board as the oversight regulator for legal services in England and Wales. The new regulatory regime enacted by the Act became fully active on 1 January 2010.

5. The LSB oversees eight "Approved Regulators", which in turn regulate individual lawyers and organisations. The eight approved regulators, designated under Part 1 of Schedule 4 of the 2007 Act, are the Law Society, the Bar Council, the Master of the Faculties, the Institute of Legal Executives, the Council for Licensed Conveyancers, the Chartered Institute of Patent Attorneys, the Institute of Trade Mark Attorneys and the Association of Law Costs Draftsmen.

In addition the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Scotland and the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants are listed as Approved Regulators in relation only to reserved probate activities.

6. Section 1 of the Act defines 8 Regulatory Objectives shared by the LSB and the Approved Regulators. These are:
 - Protecting and promoting the public interest
 - Supporting the constitutional principle of the rule of law
 - Improving access to justice
 - Protecting and promoting the interests of consumers of legal services
 - Promoting competition in the delivery of legal services
 - Encouraging an independent, strong, diverse and effective legal profession
 - Increasing public understanding of the citizen's legal rights and duties
 - Promoting and maintaining adherence to the professional principles

7. The legal profession currently consists of some 16,455 barristers, 112,246 solicitors and 12,200 individuals authorised to operate in other aspects of the legal profession such as conveyancing. The sector has been valued at £25.97 billion per annum. In total the legal sector employed 323,000 individuals in 2008. [ONS]

8. The 2010-11 LSB business plan can be found at:
http://www.legalservicesboard.org.uk/news_publications/publications/index.htm