

VOCALISE 2017/18

RUBY SHRIMPTON

Vocalise was founded in 2011 by two Bar students, Alex Just and Florence Iveson. What started out as a group of just eight mentors teaching debating to a small class in one prison for a few weeks has grown into a fully fledged pro-bono scheme through which hundreds of prisoners and law student mentors alike have benefited over the years. Vocalise is now an established initiative, teaching debating and public speaking skills to prisoners across London by harnessing the enthusiasm of aspiring barristers.

This year has been no exception. Vocalise recruited 48 mentors, all GDL and BPTC students, from well over a hundred applications for our autumn training. Mentors undergo a rigorous debating programme over the Michaelmas term in Gray's Inn. While we recruit some debate champions and prize winners, many of our recruits have never participated in debating before. We teach them the mechanics of parliamentary debating and focus on improving public speaking and advocacy skills in a structured course. We also focus on classroom management in a prison context and prepare mentors for the challenges of engaging individuals from all walks of life and levels of ability.

This year all our mentors passed the Vocalise Bootcamp in December and have been working hard to deliver weekly lessons since January. In teams of three, mentors have been

teaching in HMPs Thameside, Downview, Pentonville, Wandsworth and HMP/YOIs Isis and Feltham. We're already looking forward to recruiting our next set of debate mentors in the coming academic year.

We believe Vocalise continues to be an important and unusual experience for the prisoners we teach and for the law students who conduct the lessons. As we all know, prisons are under a great deal of pressure. With resources being stretched thin, education budgets are often the first to be cut. This has made the pro bono work that Vocalise does all the more important. The feedback from our prisoner participants is that Vocalise is one of the most interesting and valuable experiences available to them – in HMP Thameside, prisoners even have to apply to participate in the programme. The practical approach taken by the mentors and the opportunity to be listened to and to find one's voice is often of enormous value to the prisoners we work with.

For Vocalise mentors, the experience of working in prisons can be enlightening too. Preconceptions are challenged, commonalities found, jokes shared and differences explored. Vocalise continues to be the only student-run prison debate programme in the country. We feel very lucky to have the enthusiasm of so many law students, the support of the Education Department and a home in Gray's Inn. We can't wait to see how Vocalise develops next year.



Training as a VOCALISE mentor

Arabella Adams and James Halliday trained as Vocalise mentors over the 2017 Michaelmas term and have been teaching in prisons across London since January this year. They report:

'I have found Vocalise to be a really valuable experience for the advocacy practice, the opportunity to go into prisons, and the community it has provided.

I had not had much advocacy experience before Vocalise and, although I have a fair amount of teaching experience,

I never debated at school or university. Vocalise has given me the opportunity to do some debating, as well as improving on my skills of persuasion (eg convincing sometimes-reluctant students that what I am saying is valid and of interest to them). I mentioned this on every single pupillage application I sent, and also at some interviews.

Secondly, I have really appreciated the opportunity to go into prisons. I think it's important for a law student to know what they are actually like, even (or perhaps especially) if they do not intend to practise in criminal law. The students in my classes at Pentonville have been a pleasure to teach, and the learning has certainly gone both ways. The atmosphere is more like a group discussion than a formal teacher/student situation, and it's nice to be there for a reason that is positive, not patronising.

Finally, the Vocalise community is a massive plus of the project. This was one of the only opportunities I had in the autumn term to get to know my fellow students outside GDL lectures and tutorials, as well as aspiring barristers from other providers. Both our teachers and other mentors on the project have offered advice and support on pupillage applications. Vocalise has facilitated my first meaningful interactions with the Inns of Court. It continues to be really rewarding.'

Arabella Adams

'My time being part of Vocalise is something I know I will look back on with great fondness and enjoyment. First, the GDL hasn't always been a very sociable course and, unlike a lot of pro bono activities, such as FRU, Vocalise is a really sociable and relaxed atmosphere, with the training sessions in the Michaelmas term providing a great opportunity to meet and talk to other people on their way to becoming barristers. As a result, I genuinely looked forward to the evening sessions and they rarely disappointed – I'm now a member of Gray's Inn.

As someone applying to be a criminal barrister, Vocalise has afforded me the opportunity to see what very few students have seen: the inside of a prison. This gave me an insight into the struggles and problems with the criminal justice system, and the way it impacts its users, which I was able to write about in applications. Vocalise has deepened, and allowed me to demonstrate, my commitment to criminal law.

Finally, the skills Vocalise has helped me to develop are directly relevant to the Bar. The development of the public speaking ability of the group was evident throughout the training process, and my own skills improved drastically as a result of the teaching and activities provided by Vocalise. I trust this will stand me in good stead in mooting, interviews and beyond.'

James Halliday