

The secret of my success

Hashi Mohamed, 27

Studied: at City Law School

Works: as a pupil barrister at 39 Essex Street

I am a first-generation immigrant. I came here when I was nine. I didn't speak a word of English, and now I'm soon to be a pupil barrister. This does not necessarily mean we're a socially mobile society; I don't want anyone to extrapolate that from my story. I was born in Kenya to Somali parents, and my mum was never formally educated. I was brought up in Nairobi and my father died when I was nine. I came to the UK, without my mother, in June 1993.

I was raised exclusively on state benefits and attended very poor-performing schools in north-west London. I didn't really pay much attention at school – I was moving around different houses and relatives, there were lots of issues – but I scraped through my A-levels. I went to the University of Hertfordshire, starting French from scratch and studying law. My fees were paid for, but I was living off a student loan. When I finished, I wrote an e-mail to the editor of Newsnight – I told him I had no journalism experience; I wanted to explore it. He put me on a project, I got a paid salary, and I worked on several news programmes. I got that job through chutzpah, but also it was the character of that man, Peter Barron, who took a risk with me. You won't often meet people like that.

Meanwhile, I applied to Oxford for a masters and got in, with a scholarship. They offer counselling to people from poorer backgrounds, because it's difficult to adjust. But for me, I thought: 'This is where I was born to be'. Instead of being intimidated by my peers, I was inspired. If I picked up one thing from Oxford, it was sharpened discipline, how to manage my time.

After Oxford, I did the Bar course, without which you can't be a barrister. I got a £10,000 scholarship and took out a loan for £10,000. There are about 2,500 people graduating from these courses each year – and only around 500 pupillages. And before you can get a pupillage, there's a thing called a mini-pupillage. For a year and half, I couldn't get one. Although there's an application process, you really get them through contacts. Of course I think it's unfair. But there's no point trying to pick a fight with a system that has been around for a long time. Now I go into schools, telling kids if they don't stop speaking street slang when it's inappropriate and lift up their trousers, they're not going to get far.

I finished Bar school last May and accepted the pupillage at 39 Essex Street, one of the best chambers in the country.

My story is a combination of people who've believed in me, various e-mails being answered, scholarships that I could never afford, and a discipline that meant I worked very, very hard over many years. That's

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not something that you can expect every child on every estate to replicate. Any government policy that assumes that is a flawed one – and it's quite insulting. There is no easy answer.

Lilly Heine, 27

Studied: Fashion at Central Saint Martins

Works: at Dries Van Noten

My parents are German, and my dad was quite a successful journalist – he was a correspondent for German radio in Washington and then worked in London when I was 10. That was when my interest in fashion started. Both of my parents were extremely supportive and they've always wanted me and my sister to be happy, whatever we wanted to do.

I took sewing lessons from the age of 12, just for fun, though I took it pretty seriously! When I was 13, I worked in my friend's dad's shop, which sold Indian/British designs, textiles and garments. I did an internship at a theatre in Hamburg, in costume design, straight from school, then another one at Oper Frankfurt, after which I realised costume wasn't really for me. I started studying English and French literature at university in Frankfurt but my course was very dry and the people boring.

So I did some drawings and sent them off to Wimbledon School of Art. At 19, I did the foundation course there, which I loved – having tutors who knew what they were talking about and really criticised you. I worked very hard. After that, I did a BA at Chelsea College of Art and Design. That was for three years and every summer I did a long internship. The first year, I did three months at Jonathan Saunders, and in my second year, three months at Alexander McQueen, which was the one that particularly shaped me. I was making prints all day, every day, for 16 hours. And, in the end, I designed prints that actually got used – it was really exciting for me! That was for the spring/summer collection 2008.

The internships were organised through the university, and I took them really seriously. Now if I see interns who are a little bit half-hearted, or going home early – I cannot understand them.

After my third year I went straight on to my MA in fashion at Central Saint Martins. Louise Wilson, the head of that course, looks at what you do and makes you better at designing, but in your own style. It moulded my character and my style and confidence. I wanted to be on the best course; I never did it to earn money, I did it because I wanted to be better than the next person.

I won the Harrods prize at the end of my MA. After that, I did a collection for Topshop – it's like



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every designer's dream. Then I did some freelance prints for people like Jimmy Choo and Stella McCartney.

I got to do a lot of great things, but there were also long periods of not having a job and that's pretty frustrating. After nine months, I got a job at Alexander McQueen as assistant print designer – it was thanks to knowing people from having done an internship there. After that, I got a call from Dries Van Noten, and moved to Antwerp to work with him. Now I just want to see what happens.

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