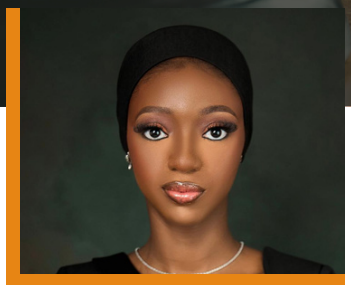
YOUNG LAWYERS AND THE PROFESSION THEY ARE INHERITING

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There is a kind of low-key disillusionment that has crept into the legal profession. It's not one big moment, it's a build-up. You feel it in courtrooms where decisions don't always seem purely reasoned, in lecture halls where the law is taught like it exists in a vacuum, and in those first few months of practice when you realise how little of what you learned actually maps onto real work. It's not an obvious crisis, but something quieter and, honestly, more unsettling. The profession just feels a bit off balance. Public trust in the courts is slipping. The Bar is questioning itself. Law schools and practitioners keep pointing fingers at each other. And right in the middle of all of this are young lawyers. You come in thinking you're joining something structured and principled, something with a clear identity. But instead, it feels like you've walked into a profession still trying to figure out what it actually is now.

Public Trust and The Judiciary

Law derives its authority from legitimacy. Strip away the robes, the gavels, the Latin maxims, and what remains is a social contract where the public agrees to be governed by legal outcomes because it believes, fundamentally, that the process is fair. When that belief weakens, everything weakens with it.

The Africa Polling Institute's 2025 Nigeria Social Cohesion Survey, which covered 5,465 face-to-face household interviews across the country's six geopolitical zones, found that 79 per cent of Nigerians have little or no trust in the judiciary. People increasingly believe that justice is not blind, that it tilts toward the wealthy, the well-connected, and the powerful. Delayed judgments that stretch into years, sometimes decades, feed the perception that the courts are inaccessible to the ordinary person. High-profile cases where outcomes seem to defy logic or evidence reinforce the narrative that something other than law is at work.

The consequences of this erosion are not merely reputational. When citizens do not trust courts, they seek alternatives, some of them dangerous. Disputes are settled outside legal frameworks, sometimes violently. On the other hand, commercial actors route their disputes through foreign jurisdictions, exporting not just cases but the economic activity that comes with them. Many cross-border transactions are deliberately structured to adopt foreign governing laws and dispute resolution mechanisms, bypassing Nigerian legal institutions altogether.

What is striking is that many within the profession acknowledge this. Senior judges have, in rare candid moments, admitted that all is not well. Bar associations pass resolutions. There are workshops, conferences, communiqués. And yet the erosion continues, because acknowledgment without structural reform is simply noise.

Into this environment steps the young lawyer, who has just spent averagely six years studying a system she is now being told, implicitly, is broken.

Young Lawyers and What They Carry

They come in large numbers. Each year, law faculties across the country produce thousands of graduates who are called to the bar, and step into practice with ideas and ideals fresh from the Nigerian Law School.

And then reality begins its education. It does not arrive abruptly; it unfolds in the early months of practice. Today's legal profession offers far more pathways than ever before, yet, more often than not, young lawyers who follow the traditional route into law firms encounter a different kind of initiation. They quickly discover that the rhythm of practice bears little resemblance to what they were taught: that clients demand outcomes, not doctrinal elegance; that judges have preferences that shape litigation strategy; that firms operate with distinct internal cultures and commercial pressures; and that effective practice requires a set of skills and instincts that formal legal education only begins to develop.

What Law School Gives and What It Doesn't

Ask a young lawyer what law school did not teach her, and the answer is less about absence and more about limits. She was taught the importance of professional ethics, the value of her work, and even the fundamentals of structuring and running a law firm. She understands how to charge for her services and the discipline the profession demands. But practice quickly reveals that knowledge alone is not the difficulty.

What she was not fully prepared for is how those principles hold up under pressure. How to maintain proper billing standards in a market that resists them. How to sustain a practice, not just structure one. How to navigate the subtle tensions between what she was taught and what she encounters in everyday legal work. These are not failures of legal education so much as the inevitable realities of a profession where experience remains the final instructor.

Is Law Too Easy to Study?

Beyond the content of legal education lies a more uncomfortable conversation: who is being admitted to study law, and under what standards.

There is a view, held quietly but widely within the profession, that the dramatic expansion of law faculties in Nigeria over the past two decades has diluted the quality of legal education and, by extension, the quality of lawyers entering the profession. Where once there were a handful of established law schools with competitive admission standards, there are now dozens of faculties, many in universities of questionable academic standing, producing lawyers by the thousands.

The Nigerian Law School has long served as a quality filter, a single bottleneck through which all aspiring lawyers must pass. But the volume is now so great, and the pressure on the system so intense, that questions are being asked about whether the filter is still working as it should. Bar examination results in recent years have shown high failure rates, which some interpret as evidence that too many ill-prepared graduates are being pushed through. Others interpret it as evidence that the Bar examination itself needs reform, that it tests the wrong things, or that the Nigerian Law School has not kept pace with the needs of contemporary practice.

What is not disputed is that there is a mismatch. The profession is receiving, each year, a large cohort of graduates whose preparation is uneven and it does not have a reliable system for sorting between them before they are called to the bar.

The stakes of this are not abstract. A doctor who is poorly trained can harm a patient. A lawyer who is poorly trained can destroy a client's life, their business, their liberty. The asymmetry of consequence demands higher standards of preparation. Whether those standards are currently being met is a question the profession is reluctant to answer honestly.

“Forget What They Taught You”

One of the most damaging things that happens to young lawyers in Nigeria occurs not in law school or in the courtroom, but in the corridor. It happens in the casual conversation with a senior colleague, in the first week on the job, when the young lawyer is told that she should put aside most of what she learned at university.

“The real world is different.” This is the phrase that echoes through the experience of almost every young Nigerian lawyer. And it is not entirely wrong, practice is different from theory, and practical adaptation is part of professional development in any field. But the manner in which this message is delivered, and the content it is used to justify, often goes far beyond reasonable adaptation.

When “the real world is different” is used to mean that legal arguments must be sharper, that clients require emotional intelligence, or that courtroom etiquette demands a certain discipline, these are legitimate lessons. No classroom can fully replicate the complexity of live practice.

But when that same phrase is used to suggest that professional ethics are negotiable, that rules may be bent for convenience, or that procedure exists to be circumvented rather than respected, then something more troubling is being transmitted. What is passed down in those moments is not practical wisdom, but a quiet erosion of standards, often by those entrusted with preserving them.

This, however, has not been my experience. My entry into the profession has been shaped by guidance, mentors who have been willing to teach, to support, and to allow room for growth without compromising on principle. That kind of stewardship reflects the profession at its best.

Yet it would be disingenuous to ignore that this is not the universal reality. The sheer volume of lawyers entering the profession each year has created a different challenge, one in which many young practitioners begin their careers without the benefit of structured mentorship or proper pupillage. Some are compelled, by necessity rather than readiness, to establish their own practices early, navigating a complex profession without the institutional or professional support that should ideally guide that transition.

In this environment, many young lawyers find themselves caught between two authorities they are meant to trust: the institutions that trained them and the practitioners who shape the realities of practice. Where these authorities align, the transition is coherent. Where they do not, the young lawyer is left to resolve the contradiction alone.

In those circumstances, survival often dictates the outcome. The pressures of practice can make conformity feel less like a choice and more like a necessity. And so, for some, the transition into the profession becomes not just a process of learning, but of gradual compromise.

Between Guardianship and Gatekeeping

It would be unfair to paint all senior lawyers with the same brush. There are members of the older bar who are genuine reformers, who have spent their careers modelling the standards they preach, who mentor young lawyers with honesty and integrity, who have pushed for reform of legal education, of the courts, of the ethical framework of the profession. They exist, and they matter.

But they are not the dominant force. And even among the reform-minded senior bar, there is a complicated relationship with change, particularly the kind of change that the next generation is bringing.

Technology is the most visible fault line. Legal technology has transformed the practice of law in many parts of the world. In Nigeria, adoption has been uneven and contested. Some senior lawyers have embraced it, understanding that efficiency tools that serve the client are tools that serve the profession. Others have resisted, sometimes for self-interested reasons, sometimes out of genuine concern that technology is changing the nature of legal work in ways that could undermine its quality and its ethics.

The young lawyer who wants to build a technology-driven practice often finds herself in conflict not just with the infrastructure of the profession but with its culture. The culture of law, in many chambers, remains deeply conservative. Senior partners who built their careers on a certain way of doing things are not always equipped, emotionally or intellectually, to evaluate a fundamentally different approach.

And so the generation gap in the profession is not just about methods. It is about what the profession is for, and what kind of lawyer it is trying to produce.

What Reform Actually Requires

The reforms that would address this crisis are not mysterious. They are discussed in law school common rooms, at bar conferences, in the editorial pages of legal journals. They are known. The question is not what needs to change but who has the authority, the will, and the leverage to change it.

Legal education needs to be restructured, not at the margins but fundamentally. The curriculum must integrate practical skills with doctrinal learning, not as an afterthought but as a core commitment. Clinical legal education, where students work on real cases under supervision, must be expanded dramatically. Professional ethics must be taught not as an abstract theoretical subject but through simulation, through case studies drawn from the actual dilemmas that practitioners face. And the accreditation standards for law faculties must be enforced with a rigor that they currently are not.

The persistent concern regarding the preparedness of law graduates for professional practice in Nigeria is less a function of insufficient duration and more a consequence of the misallocation of training between theory and practice. The current model, comprising a five-year LL.B program followed by the Nigerian Law School, places disproportionate emphasis on doctrinal instruction while leaving the transition into actual legal practice largely unstructured and unregulated. A more effective approach would permit a reduction of the undergraduate program to four years, provided it is complemented by curricular reforms that integrate clinical and skills-based training, and more importantly, by the introduction of a mandatory, structured period of supervised practice. Comparative jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom and Canada demonstrate that professional competence is best developed through regulated apprenticeships, where mentorship, accountability, and performance evaluation are formalised.

In contrast, the Nigerian system effectively leaves this critical phase to chance, resulting in inconsistencies in competence and professional development. Accordingly, the reform imperative is not to extend academic training, but to rebalance it by embedding a compulsory, well-regulated pupillage framework that ensures that legal practitioners are not only knowledgeable, but demonstrably capable of applying the law in real-world contexts.

The senior bar must take its mentorship obligations seriously, not as a favour, not as an informal courtesy, but as a professional responsibility. And the profession must create structures that give young lawyers somewhere to turn when they face the dilemmas that are currently resolved only by capitulation or isolation.

The judiciary must be reformed. This is the hardest conversation, and the one most likely to be avoided. Judicial accountability mechanisms must be strengthened, not weakened. Appointments must be transparent and merit-based. Delays must be addressed structurally, not managed rhetorically. This is a political challenge as much as a legal one, which is precisely why it requires the bar to engage politically, to advocate loudly, to refuse to accept a broken judiciary as the permanent condition of the profession.

The Inheritance

The young lawyer who enters the profession today inherits something complicated. She inherits a system with genuine achievements, a common law tradition of considerable sophistication, a jurisprudence that has produced remarkable judgments, a bar with members of real distinction and integrity. She also inherits a system under strain, one in which trust is declining, standards are contested, education is questioned, and the path from aspiration to practice is strewn with moral hazards.

She did not create this inheritance. But she will either perpetuate it or transform it. And which of those she does will depend not just on her individual character but on whether the profession is willing to give her the tools, the support, and the environment she needs to be the kind of lawyer she intended to be when she opened her first textbook.

The crisis of the legal profession is, at its heart, a crisis of the next generation. Not because they are the problem but because they are the only ones who can be the solution, and only if they are not swallowed by the very system they are trying to fix.

The labyrinth is real. The exits exist. But they require more than individual courage to find. They require a profession that is finally, honestly, willing to look at what it has become, and to decide that it can do better.

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