

# BAR STANDARDS BOARD

REGULATING BARRISTERS

## Bar Professional Training Course Kaplan Law School Monitoring Visit, 29 February 2012

<b>Name of Institution</b>	<b>Date of Visit</b>
Kaplan Law School	29 February 2012

<b>Title of Course/award</b>	<b>Nature/status of the course</b>
Bar Professional Training Course	Second year of Bar Professional Training Course

<b>Numbers</b>	<b>Term Dates</b>
Approved for:  60 Full-Time in 2010 90 FT in 2011 Proposed: 120 FT from 2012  66 at time of visit	September 2011 – June 2012

<b>Panel Members</b>	<b>Role and area of primary responsibility</b>
Ms Emily Windsor (Chair)	Barrister, Chair of BPTC Sub-Committee
Dr John Carrier	Senior Academic
Mr David Fleming	Lay member of Education and Training Committee
Mr Stephen Page	Practitioner
Miss Isobel Mostyn	Education Officer, BSB

<b>HEI Team</b>	<b>Role and area of primary responsibility</b>
Mr James Wakefield	BPTC Course Director, Kaplan Law School
Ms Lynda Gibbs	BPTC Course Leader, Kaplan Law School
Dr Giles Proctor	Head of Kaplan Law School
Mr Ian Fox	BPTC Course Leader, Nottingham Law School
Mr Stephen Wells	BPTC Tutor (Criminal), Kaplan Law School
Ms Alexandra Frith	BPTC Tutor (Civil), Kaplan Law School
Mr Nigel Waddington	BPTC Tutor (Civil), Kaplan Law School

<b>Context: The HEI/Provider</b>
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Kaplan Law School, London, offers the BPTC course that is delivered at Nottingham Law School. Students have access to identical BPTC course materials, and the Kaplan Course Leader is a former member of staff from Nottingham Law School. Kaplan Law School London also offers the LPC and GDL. The course is validated for 90 students in 2011.

This visit was held as part of the BSB's annual programme of visits to BPTC Providers to monitor the quality and standards of the course and to determine whether the course is being delivered in accordance with the Course Specification Requirements and Guidance ("the Blue Book").

The panel was provided in advance with key documentation including the law school's most recent Annual Monitoring Report, copies of the last two years' External Examiner and BSB visit reports, and other relevant information. During the visit the panel had an opportunity to tour the premises and to meet with management, teaching staff, and with students. The panel also observed a number of classes. All of the above informed the panel's conclusions contained in this report.

### **1. Adherence to course aims, philosophy and standards**

The panel was satisfied that the course is being delivered in accordance with the course specification requirements and guidance (the 'Blue Book') and that the academic and professional standards of the course are appropriate. Recommendations for areas to focus on for future improvement are contained in the report below.

### **2. Quality management systems**

The students reported that there is an effective formal feedback mechanism through a staff: student liaison committee.

Students were aware of the attendance requirement and confirmed that it was enforced appropriately. They indicated that at times it was a challenge to fit in external activities e.g. pro bono work with their studies. In response to the previous visit report Kaplan indicated that they have adopted a flexible approach to allow students to rearrange classes if they had a mini-pupillage with further one to one sessions with the tutor if this was not possible.

The panel was impressed by the quality of the Annual Monitoring Report and its presentation of statistics and action points.

The teaching staff reported that there are regular staff meetings to deal appropriately with issues linked to the quality of the course. They also reported that as a small teaching team, there was constant dialogue which allowed problems to be resolved effectively. The teaching team commented that the course was well managed and it was helpful that members of the management team had a teaching background.

### **3. Staffing and staff development**

The management reported that there has been an increase in the amount of peer review processes staff had undertaken (observation and feedback) this year, and that staff were given 15 days per year which was available for continuing professional development (e.g. time in practice). The teaching staff reported that they also took part in off-site workshops. The Course Leaders confirmed that they observed subject delivery as part of tutor development. Training opportunities were provided for staff to focus on their specialist subject areas.

The management reported that the BPTC is currently overstaffed due to the under recruitment, but that staff have been lecturing on the GDL and other programmes as well as on the BPTC. It was thought beneficial to have spare staff capacity as it allows for staff development and consolidation of experience for new staff.

The teaching staff were very complimentary about working at Kaplan and reported that staff morale was high.

#### 4. Curriculum content and structure

In the main students and staff were content with the content delivered in the course. One area of concern which was raised by students and staff was the module Resolution and Disputes Out of Court (ReDOC). The students perceived that the ReDOC syllabus was limited and in their view the assessment method was problematic. The teaching staff were of the view that it had been appropriate to replace the former Negotiation module but that there was an indicative content overload for a module which counted for 5% of the course. The Mediation elements were considered to be very important in particular in relation to the emphasis on Mediation Advocacy. However there was concern between what the syllabus required and the material which was available (in terms of texts). The monitoring panel reassured staff and students that a ReDOC working group, drawn from the Providers, had been set up to examine the module and would be reporting back in due course.

The management team acknowledged that the students had raised concerns about aspects of the course which was delivered from Nottingham Law School (NLS); however they assured the panel that they have continued input into the overall course design. The management team stressed the importance of achieving parity of learning experience for both cohorts, and that the Kaplan team is fully involved in the design of teaching materials and assessments. It was noted that there was considerable communication between Nottingham and Kaplan in relation to the course; however the process was not as effective as it could have been had all staff been located in the same building. The opportunity for informal dialogue between staff was therefore reduced. It was thought that a helpful addition to the process might be to produce draft alternative tutor notes for particular sessions.

#### 5. Admissions and student profile

The students reported to the panel that they did not perceive there were any weak students on the course at Kaplan. Students indicated they felt equally matched in Advocacy and had not been aware of any students with English language difficulties. Similarly, teaching staff reported that when students were working with each other in modules such as ReDOC, for instance, they observed a good level of ability and language skills.

Students described the Kaplan admissions process to the panel: it comprised an interview, a written test and an advocacy exercise, which they felt were designed to assess reasoning more than technicalities about how to address a Court. The students confirmed that they were encouraged by the admissions process and that they applied because of this aspect of pre-selection in that it was a selling point rather than a deterrent. The management team indicated that they marked the applications and those applicants who scored over 70/100 were invited to interview (which includes a written exercise).

The teaching and management staff were extremely impressed with the current cohort of students. The recruited numbers were lower than expected this year, partly because some students did not turn up to enrol and also because 25 students, who had accepted offers, deferred entry over the summer. It is thought the reasons for this were that students were being more cautious about undertaking the course and that some had not received the funding they had been expecting.

The teaching staff reported that the current cohort was a strong peer group with aptitude and motivation for the Bar, and that they were confident these students would succeed in their chosen career. The view of the staff was that this year's cohort had worked harder to prepare for the teaching sessions than previous years and the tutors had reinforced the need to keep pace with the workload right from the start of the course.

#### 6. Teaching and Learning (knowledge and skills areas)

The students were very complimentary about the teaching they had received and the methods used, in particular the high number of Small Group Sessions and the approachability of the staff when students had queries. Students initiated revision sessions and had good tutor support in this area.

The students felt that an area for improvement for learning was access to past examination papers and the mock exam procedure. Opinion was divided between students as to whether the mock examinations for the knowledge areas should be 'take-home/self-mark' assessments or not. Some felt concerned that they were marking their own mocks, although they found tutors very happy to talk about scripts.

### *Confirmed*

The teaching staff thought it would be valuable to have a debriefing session after teaching, in order to provide feedback to those designing the course. Although there are currently feedback forms available from all criminal tutors on all sessions, this year the plan is to condense this material so that it is more easily digested. A debrief document and a meeting to discuss it was thought to be a helpful suggestion.

## **7. Standards and assessment strategy and methods (including progression data)**

The management team reported that last year's first sit results for civil and criminal procedure had not been as expected, and noted that the non-aggregation of the MCQ and SAQ section of the assessments may have been a contributing factor. It was also a challenge to strike the right balance between focus on assessments and preparation for practice. Management indicated the balance is being improved to be more assessment focussed. Some but not all members of the management team were of the view that it might have been helpful to have formal mock examinations which were marked by the tutors. This was being addressed with a full 3 hour mock examination in one subject at the time of the visit. Some of the teaching staff indicated that when students marked their own mock examinations there was a valuable learning process to self-mark in order to understand the way marks are allocated. It was noted that 2010-11 was the first year of the course at Kaplan and that teaching experience had developed considerably since then.

Management reported that at the time of the visit, 46% of the 2010-11 cohort had gained pupillage and that 27% of the 2011-12 cohort had arrived with pupillage and to date approximately 30 students on the current course had obtained pupillage (just under half the cohort).

The panel sought the students' views on whether PCs should be permitted in Opinion Writing and Drafting assessments. They felt that use of time is very different when using a different writing method, but that in general they were supportive of the idea. The teaching staff also agreed that it seems sensible. They noted that one dyslexic student had not wanted to be singled out by using a computer, so there could be other positive reasons for allowing all students to use PCs.

## **8. Student support and quality of student experience**

The students were very positive about the quality of the student experience at Kaplan, reporting that there were no complaints and that any minor issues (e.g. a broken printer) were raised and resolved effectively. As noted earlier in the report, a staff/student liaison committee made up of student representatives who gather views of their peers prior to meetings is an effective mechanism for communication with the course team.

Students were very impressed by the support and teaching on the BPTC, and find it useful that Large Group Session topics are also covered during Small Group Sessions – of which there were many. They reported that if staff would research information for them and send follow-up emails to clarify a point which had been raised in a session. Tutors were available outside formal teaching sessions to answer questions. The small group sizes were also highlighted by students; they felt it was advantageous that there were such small numbers which encouraged full student participation in group work and contributed to a high rate of group co-operation and support.

Students mentioned that when they chose to study at Kaplan they accepted that the course material would be designed by Nottingham Law School, however they thought it would be useful if Kaplan tutors had more input and feedback in relation to the NLS course. Students also felt that it would be better if internet uploads for the modules did not have to go through the NLS site. They felt that this would minimise the minor delays in uploading that they had experienced.

Students found the workload intensive but felt that if they kept in touch with the tutors and managed their workload they did not encounter problems. Students indicated that tutors provided pastoral support which was effective. They felt that the small close-knit groups at Kaplan assisted in helping tutors to be aware of any issues.

## Confirmed

Students thought the best aspects of the BPTC at Kaplan were the peer group, the motivating atmosphere and the contact with the tutors, who want all the students to succeed not just in examinations but in pupillage. They felt distant from NLS at times and perceived that some of the Kaplan tutors wanted to deliver aspects of the course in a different way (but were unable to do so).

Students commented that the personal tutor system was very good and they felt fully supported in finding pupillage or an alternative career. Whilst the careers office is very good, they reported that it seemed to be more focussed towards the LPC and they would appreciate more pro bono opportunities. The management team explained that there are limited spaces on pro bono work but that students have been able to initiate opportunities.

Management reported that the personal tutor system was based on two formal appointments with their tutees, plus they had an open door policy, and that the location of the tutors' offices amidst the teaching rooms was conducive to an effective personal tutor system.

The students said that they would definitely recommend the course to others and that it has exceeded their expectations.

## 9. Learning resources (Library and IT)

The students were positive about the learning environment and resources. They found it easy to locate study spaces, books and computers, the IT and recording equipment worked well, they had access to practice rooms, and if there were any issues with broken resources they were fixed quickly.

Whilst the management team were content with the course being delivered from NLS, they had noticed that issues with IT changes could cause delays because this is dealt with at NLS.

The teaching staff said that if possible they would like more teaching rooms, and more access to rooms for extra activities.

## 10. Equality and diversity

No issues related to equality and diversity emerged during the visit.

## Good practice, distinguishing features

The panel wished to commend the:

- positive manner in which last year's recommendations had been responded to;
- commitment to high quality staff training;
- care with which students are selected and admitted;
- strong and effective management;
- highly committed and motivated staff, especially the new members of staff;
- impressive facilities and good working environment;
- highly positive attitude of the students they met and extremely high levels of student satisfaction.

## Conclusions: recommendation on accreditation/approval/continuing approval

Continuing approval (with recommendations)

For the period: September 2012 to July 2013

## Recommendations

*Kaplan Law School, 29 February 2012*

*Confirmed*

Where recommendations are additionally made, please detail below:	
Recommendation 1	To review the relationship between Nottingham and Kaplan in relation to: desirability of pre-meetings, speed of response to queries and issues, tutor and student access to IT systems, a more structured process of debriefing, and Kaplan staff input into the planning and development of the course.
Recommendation 2	To immediately review the way mock examinations are conducted, with reference to the location in which they are taken and the marking arrangements (preferably by teaching staff).
Recommendation 3	To continue with efforts to expand and increase pro bono opportunities for students.

<b>Response by the Provider (maximum one page)</b>
<p>The tutors at Kaplan are pleased that students appreciate the Open Door Policy and access to tutors outside of business hours. Much effort is made to reassure students throughout the course and to facilitate and encourage learning and revision groups.</p> <p>Kaplan has recommended that the Subject Coordinator for ReDOC become part of the Working Group for ReDOC</p> <p>Pro Bono opportunities have increased since the writing of this report. Careers has expanded and employed a new member of the Careers Team dedicated to the increased provision of such opportunities.</p> <p>Kaplan has long supported the process of mock papers being taken in exam conditions. It is understood that this will be mandatory with effect from 2013/14.</p> <p>Kaplan has continued to provide materials and course review documentation to Nottingham and is keen to create more materials going forward.</p> <p>There have been fewer IT issues in during this academic year.</p> <p>Overall, Kaplan are delighted with the student satisfaction and achievement rates and continue to strive to increase the number of Kaplan students achieving excellent results and pupillage. The materials for the selection Events for the 2013/14 cohort were changed and made more challenging.</p> <p>We are delighted that the 11-12 cohort went on to achieve exceptionally high results in their assessments and in the centrally set assessments in particular.</p>