

BAR STANDARDS BOARD

REGULATING BARRISTERS

Bar Professional Training Course Kaplan Law School Report of Visit held on 04 February 2014

Name of Institution	Date of Visit/Meeting
Kaplan Law School	04 February 2014

Title of Course/award	Nature/status of the course
Bar Professional Training Course	Full-time BPTC

Numbers/modes approved	Dates of course
Approved for: 120 FT in 2013 84 at time of visit	September 2013 to July 2014

Panel Members	Role and area of primary responsibility
Dr Simon Thornton Wood (Chair)	Head of Education and Training, BSB
David Fleming	Lay Member, Education and Training Committee, BSB
Mike Molan	Chair of the Centralised Exam Board
Paras Junejo	Education Officer (BPTC), BSB

Provider Team	Role and area of primary responsibility
Giles Proctor	Head of Law School
Lynda Gibbs	BPTC Course Director
Alex Frith	BPTC Tutor (Civil)
Juliet Chase	Head of Operations
Andrea Ursprung	Civil Lecturer, Course Leader, Advanced Civil
Monica Whyte	Tutor
Allan Briddock	Tutor

Rationale for the visit
<p>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").</p>

Kaplan Law School, 04 February 2014

The Panel was provided in advance with key documentation including the law school's most recent Annual Reflective Review, copies of the last three years' External Examiner reports and the last BSB monitoring report, and other relevant information. During the visit, the Panel had the opportunity to tour the premises and meet with management, teaching staff and students. Two members of the Panel were also able to observe a Civil Advocacy class, focusing on case management.

All of the above informed the Panel's conclusions contained in this report.

Context: The HEI/Provider

Kaplan Law School offers the BPTC course that is delivered at Nottingham Law School (NLS). Students have access to identical BPTC course materials. Kaplan also offers the LPC and GDL. The course is validated for 120 students for the academic year of 2013/14; there are a total of 84 students on the course, all full-time.

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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.

2. Quality management systems

The Panel were provided with copies of the minutes from Programme Committee meetings, where members of staff met with student representatives from each tutor group. The Programme Committee meets three times per academic year.

The Panel found Kaplan's Annual Reflective Review for 2012/13 to be detailed and informative, and includes further details about Kaplan's quality assurance systems.

The teaching staff feed back to the Course Director on issues concerning the students and the course, and there are regular meetings held to discuss suggested changes. A new Peer Review initiative is underway, coordinated by the new Director of Studies for Kaplan – this process involves written feedback on the tutors' performance and a meeting for review.

3. Staffing and staff development

The Panel were very impressed by evidence of practitioner experience among all members of staff. At least two members of the full BPTC teaching staff are advocacy trainers with their Inns of Court, and all are either full or door tenants at chambers. Two members of staff are part-time.

Although Kaplan runs the LPC and GDL courses as well, the BPTC staff only teach on the BPTC. They also supervise mootings and advocacy competitions that are run for GDL students in their preparation for the Bar course.

Each member of staff has 15 court days per year in their contract. Kaplan also runs training courses for teachers, and three members of staff are studying the PGCE, as well as all members undertaking legal and professional development courses for the options modules that are taught in third term.

The three members of staff who met with the Panel reported that Kaplan had been very supportive in terms of staff development and maintaining currency of practice. A panel event on the topic of forced marriage had recently been held by Kaplan, and offered practitioners 1.5 hours of CPD. Kaplan are looking to hold a similar panel event on sentencing in the near future.

Members of staff also take part in initiatives outside of legal and professional development.

4. Curriculum content and structure

The students were generally content with the curriculum, but raised some issues. There were concerns that their preparation for exams was not tying up with the syllabus, and they felt that there were some topics taught on which they were not examined. Many stated that they were unclear as to the purpose of some of the preparation.

The students expressed concern about the civil litigation syllabus. They reported issues with gauging how much preparation was needed for exams; they did not have access to past papers and felt that they had not been given a satisfactory reason for this.

Many students mentioned that the induction week could have been condensed. Later, the tutors also identified this and reported that there was an intention to change the format of the beginning of the course.

One major area of concern raised by both students and tutors was that concerning access to the course materials. The students recognised that although the briefs and papers were very good in terms of content, there appeared to be administrative issues and sometimes students received papers late. They were aware that NLS students receive their papers in advance and requested that they be afforded the same opportunity. The tutors reported that materials were put out for the students one week in advance, and no issues of late receipt of papers had been reported to them. The materials were also placed on the virtual learning environment. The tutors did however report that they would appreciate receiving course materials at the beginning of the academic year, instead of the materials being released on a rolling basis. Where problems were identified, these were attributed to constraints set by NLS ways of working.

The students acknowledged that Kaplan had arranged for additional material to supplement the quality of the course materials – for example, a sentencing lecture had been run by Kaplan for the students, which was not on the NLS curriculum.

The tutors stated that generally the course materials were working well, and that minor errors were found and corrected. It was identified that NLS provide their students with electronic copies of the course materials at the beginning of the academic year. One tutor expressed his concern at the quality of NLS materials for the Immigration option; however, he had spoken to his counterpart at NLS who had proved to be very receptive to the feedback. The Panel identified that there appeared to be a general lack of systematic procedure of feedback and no evident process of continuous improvement in working with NLS.

The management team reported that they had submitted an extensive review of the course to NLS in April 2011. Furthermore, NLS had reduced the length of teaching sessions from 1.5 hours to one hour. There were concerns expressed about the criminal litigation course – Kaplan had delivered a supplementary sentencing lecture. All in all, the NLS course materials were reported to be used as a starting point, but not prescriptive.

5. Admissions and student profile

Although the course was validated for 120 places, only 84 were enrolled for this academic year 2013/14 – the course fees have been increased by 12% for this year, which has visibly impacted on the student numbers.

Of these 84 students, 92% (77) are home students; 6% (5) are EU students; and 2% (2) are non-EU students.

43% (36) achieved a 1st in their undergraduate degree; 56% (47) achieved a 2:1; and 1% (1) had a US degree. Kaplan raised their minimum degree requirement to 2:1 for 2013/14.

31% (26) attended Oxbridge for their undergraduate degree; 38% (32) went to a Russell Group university; and 31% (26) attended another university.

The students described the admissions process to the Panel: following the submission of the application form to the course, there was an interview, a written test and an oral advocacy exercise. The students showed their appreciation of the selection process, stating that it allowed for a common baseline and meant that every student who passed the interview stage and started the course was at the same minimum standard as the others.

Both the management team and teaching staff were very impressed with the calibre of the students enrolled on the course this year. It was identified that the transition from academic-based studies to skills-based studies often proved challenging for students nonetheless.

6. Teaching and Learning (knowledge and skills areas)

The quality of teaching and learning that was observed by members of the Panel was very good, and the students were well prepared for their Civil Advocacy session. The Panel was unable to see tutor feedback at the end of the session, owing to the timetable of the visit.

The students were generally positive about the teaching at Kaplan, although they found the lectures to be a little dry at times. There was some concern expressed by a few students over the consistency of teaching, but most reported that they had been able to approach another tutor with their concerns and have them dealt with. Students were particularly pleased with the quality of feedback from Advocacy tutors.

The students remained concerned that they did not have access to past papers in order to help them prepare for exams.

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

The Panel identified good standards delivered by the course and the feedback from external examiner reports has been generally positive overall.

The students had some criticism regarding the timing of feedback for written Opinions – they mentioned that they did not receive feedback on their first written Opinion until they had written two further Opinions, and stated that they would have appreciated earlier feedback to ensure that they were making the most of their opportunities to practice this skill before the assessment.

The use of the Hampel method during Advocacy sessions was also reported to be unpopular among

Kaplan Law School, 04 February 2014

the students, although they understood its benefits.

The management team reported that 22% of the current academic cohort had gained pupillage before starting on the course.

8. Student support and quality of student experience

The Panel had the opportunity of meeting a group of approximately 20 students, all of whom were full-time. The students were very positive about the support offered to them by tutors on the BPTC; they greatly appreciated the tutors' open door policy, and stated that their feedback was taken into consideration.

They were very complimentary about the admissions process, and appreciated that the interview process allowed all students to start the course on equal footing and allowed for a minimum standard across the cohort.

Six of the students who met with the Panel had already obtained pupillage; two of these students had taken advantage of the careers service before starting the course, as it was available to them once they had accepted their offer. The careers service was found to be exceptionally helpful to all students, giving them the opportunity to partake in mock interviews, and providing links to the profession. Kaplan's ARR for 2012/13 gave detailed information on the advocacy and opinion writing competitions available to BPTC students, as well as student mentoring scheme.

The students reported that although pro bono is not compulsory, it is strongly encouraged and the majority (if not all) of students undertake pro bono projects. There was some concern from students about one of the careers advisors going on maternity leave in the near future, and students were not aware that cover had been arranged – however, the tutors reassured the Panel that there will be continuity and that the management team are arranging cover.

All of the students were quite clear in their opinion that Kaplan should develop its own course, and none of them had any regrets about choosing Kaplan.

9. Learning resources (Library and IT)

Kaplan's Annual Reflective Review (ARR) of 2012/13 details the facilities available at the institution. Kaplan students have access to Nottingham Law School's online library, and there is a Professional Resource Centre which is shared among the BPTC, LPC and GDL students. As well as this, BPTC students have their own designated Bar Quiet Study Room (BQSR), which includes computers and a printer/photocopier. Extra sockets and desks were installed in the BQSR in the academic year of 2011/12 to allow for increased numbers of students using personal laptops.

Each teaching room and the lecture theatre in the building have a computer connected to the Kaplan network, a DVD player, projector and a screen. There are two dedicated BPTC rooms which are set up in the form of a court room, with an elevated desk for the 'judge'. The lecture theatre now seats 110 students, and lectures (although compulsory for BPTC students) are recorded and placed on the virtual learning environment.

10. Equality and diversity

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

Good practice, distinguishing features

The Panel wished to commend Kaplan on the following:

- Their approach to the selection of students has resulted in a strong element of aptitude.
- The students were well prepared and very engaged during class.
- The students in the meeting with the Panel were open, engaging and very complimentary of Kaplan.
- Kaplan continues to produce exceptional results in assessments, both centralised and internal.
- The pastoral care was commended by the students.

Conclusions: recommendation on accreditation/approval/continuing approval

Continuing approval (with recommendations) for the period September 2014 to July 2015.

Recommendations

The following recommendations must be addressed:

Recommendation 1	Managing the relationship with NLS. To the extent that it is within Kaplan's power: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- There needs to be a systematic development of a positive feedback loop on the course materials with NLS; and- More can be done to drive general feedback to NLS.
Recommendation 2	Management and tutors should take steps to maintain the confidence of the students in the course materials and avoid distracting them with concerns about interactions with NLS.
Recommendation 3	Nevertheless, there does seem to be an issue over the availability and/or release of course materials from NLS. The Kaplan management team should seek to clarify this with NLS.
Recommendation 4	Consider reviewing the induction programme, which does not seem to reflect the quality of the course itself.

Response by the Provider (maximum one page)

The Kaplan teaching team are proud of this report which demonstrates the efforts they go to in order to ensure the maximum successes for their student body.

The relationship with NLS has hit the buffers somewhat this year in terms of receipt of materials due to a different process being initiated at NLS and print production forms becoming obsolete.

KLS tutors are committed and professional and, as a team, strive to deliver high quality sessions in spite of sometimes weak materials.

Kaplan teaching team fully expects their 2013/14 cohort to achieve outstanding results in the summer exams and become the 'market leading' BPTC in terms of success rates and employability.

A change to the Induction process has become unnecessary.