

Report for the Bar Standards Board from an audit visit to BPP University: Manchester 5th June 2014

Context:

The visit was commissioned as an independent audit of BPP Manchester's compliance with the provisions of the BSB's BPTC Handbook and other QA standards.

It followed a BSB visit to the University on 7 January 2014 triggered by over-recruitment onto the course. During that visit, three breaches of the BPTC Handbook had been identified.

The visit was conducted by Professor Phil Cardew on behalf of the BSB.

Progress made against initial concerns:

During the audit, BPP presented evidence of the measures taken to address the concerns raised by the BSB review panel in January 2014. Specifically, these reflected upon processes put into place to address issues of over-recruitment, this year and in the future, staffing, and the English-language competency of students.

This evidence was cross-referenced during meetings with senior staff, more junior colleagues (responsible for the teaching of the course) and, where relevant, students.

1. Over-recruitment:

For the academic year 2013-2014, BPP had recruited 54 Full Time students onto a course that was validated for 48 Full Time students.

BPP provided evidence that they had systematically addressed the issue of recruitment, to address the requirement to manage numbers within the limits set by the BSB.

Areas to note were that:

- The process of recruitment in 2013 was subject to the management of variable factors that presented a challenge to the provider. In the particular case of recruitment in Manchester in 2013, these focused upon the late decision of a group of Malaysian students to study in Manchester (rather than their original choice of the University of the West of England)

due to the family ties of one member of the group within the Manchester region. This led to the recruitment of 20 Malaysian students in Manchester in 2013 (the contrasting estimate for 2014 being 5).

- At the same time, BPP openly reflected that conversion rates in Manchester had been informed by their experience of operating in Leeds for a number of years. BPP acknowledged that this had, in this year of operation, proven to be inaccurate, with higher conversion levels in Manchester directly contributing to the over-recruitment. However, it was still uncertain whether this remained a 'one off' resulting from the factors described, above, or whether the higher conversion rate was a feature of recruitment in the region.
- However, BPP also reflected that they had put into place closer scrutiny of individual applications for 2014 and were clear that they considered they had a far more accurate understanding of student intention, related to expected outcomes in gateway qualifications and ties to the region. BPP provided evidence of this scrutiny and its impact in the decision making process leading to offers to applicants. The University was reassuring that the process was managed far more closely this year, and that numbers would be controlled far more tightly.

Having taken all matters into consideration, it was viewed that BPP well understood the challenges implicit in managing the recruitment process. The University was aware of the risks of over-recruitment in the future and had put into place mechanisms which sought to mitigate the risks in the future. These included frequent reports on progress made with applications, throughout the year, and the employment of a statistician to specifically monitor, and forecast, recruitment to the Manchester Course.

2. Staffing levels

Concerns relating to staffing provision, and staff-student ratios as prescribed within the BSB 'Blue Book' directly relate to, and arise from, the concern considered above (1). However, the concern does not simply relate to staff-student numbers, but also to the nature and status of staff appointed to address the over-recruitment in 2013 (it being noted in the January report that these were freelance staff who might not immediately provide the same level of support as those on full-time contracts).

Reflecting on their management of the over-recruitment in 2013, BPP provided assurance that following the BSB triggered visit of 7 January 2014 they had taken swift action to respond to the concerns expressed regarding staffing and had outlined the actions put into place to engage additional staffing to meet the recruited student numbers. These appeared both to be reasonable and professional, but, by the very nature of recruitment processes, were not necessarily swift enough to deal with the issue immediately.

Staff, and students, met during the course of the audit, confirmed that following the BSB's visit in January 2014 class sizes had been kept within the limits prescribed by the BSB, and there were no areas where smaller groups were seen

to 'off-set' larger ones in delivery of the course. Students, in particular, expressed satisfaction with the group sizes in which they were taught.

Through the review, and notwithstanding issues of non-compliance with the requirements in the autumn of 2014, it was found that:

- Processes around induction, peer observation and mentoring are of a very high standard, and represent some of the better practice in the sector.
- Students met through the visit were unfailingly complimentary of the accessibility of staff (at all levels of the University) and their desire to provide additional academic, and pastoral, support, whenever necessary.
- Students also reflected entirely positively on their ability to feed back on their learning experience and to engage in meaningful staff-student liaison – again, at all levels of the University.

Staff within BPP demonstrated recognition of the challenges of delivering teaching in very small groups, and that there might be an optimum minimum size of delivery in this respect. They also recognised the need to balance student groups in terms of nationality, age, gender and temperament of students, wherever possible.

In all aspects of delivery, assurance was provided regarding day-to-day quality processes, these included:

- Well-functioning staff-student liaison meetings which offered students useful opportunities to feed back on their studies and to raise any issues of concern.
- Reporting at module and course level on the progression and achievement of students.
- Team teaching, peer observation, mentoring and support by senior staff for colleagues new to teaching.
- Good end-of-module feedback questionnaires, which were responded to effectively by senior staff.
- Good personal support and guidance for students.
- Accessible staff, who made themselves available in person, by email and on the telephone, as required.

All of these processes were reflected upon positively by students met during the Audit.

3. English Language:

During the triggered visit of 7 January 2014, the BSB visiting panel was not satisfied that the English Language standards set by the BPTC Handbook were being enforced correctly. As a consequence of subsequent BSB enforcement of the standards set by the Handbook three students left the course.

Staff from BPP reported upon the processes operating through the application and enrolment phases to ensure appropriate levels of English language proficiency from applicants and the changes that had been made to address the

breaches of the BPTC Handbook requirement. Past practice, whilst appearing reasonable (including Skype interviews, where deemed necessary) had proven inadequate and it was apparent that they cannot pick up on that which is required in English language proficiency.

- Systems had been put in place for staff to receive additional specialist training in English language proficiency. This had led to greater discussion within teaching teams (indicated also within the meeting with staff) and a better awareness of issues at the point of recruitment.
- Additional measures had now been included at the beginning of each academic year, to evaluate students' English language skills and respond to concerns as they were identified. These included early diagnostic testing of students, opportunities for formal interview, and increased specialist support for any students who were identified as giving potential concern.

It is apparent that BPP have reflected professionally on the concerns raised and put in place systems to ensure full compliance with the requirement.

Conclusion:

This review was conducted in the context of a transparent debate with senior staff of BPP, which allowed for a constructive discussion of the issues raised by the BSB, and the process of review. This was then cross-referenced in meetings with staff and students, which were of a more 'standard' review approach and allowed reassurance to be gained regarding the responses from senior staff.

BPP have responded seriously to the issues raised by the BSB and provided evidence of the institution of systems and processes to address the requirements of the BPTC Handbook and the recent Visiting Panel.



Phil Cardew BA PhD FRSA
June 2014.