

**BAR  
STANDARDS  
BOARD**

REGULATING BARRISTERS

**Bar Professional Training Course  
BPP Law School, London  
Report of visit held on 26 February 2015**

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|--|----------------------|
| <b>Name of Institution</b>               | <b>Date of Visit</b> |
| BPP Law School, London<br>BPP University | 26 February 2015     |

|                                  |                                |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>Title of Course/award</b>     | <b>Nature/status of course</b> |
| Bar Professional Training Course | Accredited BPTC                |

|   |                             |
|---|-----------------------------|
| <b>Numbers/modes approved</b>   | <b>Dates of course</b>      |
| Approved for:<br>264 full-time (255 enrolled 2014-15)<br>96 part-time (58 enrolled 2014-15) | September 2014 to July 2015 |

| <b>Panel Members</b> | <b>Role and area of primary responsibility</b>  |
|----------------------|---|
| Dr Victoria Stec     | Temporary Education Manager, BSB (Chair)  |
| Ms Joanna Robinson   | Deputy Under Treasurer Lincoln's Inn; Member of BPTC Sub-Committee                      |
| Ms Rebecca Foulkes   | Barrister; Member of BPTC Sub-Committee   |
| Ms Gemma Davies      | BPTC Course Leader (part-time mode), University of Northumbria; Provider representative |

| <b>Provider Team attending the event</b> | <b>Role and area of primary responsibility</b>                       |
|--|--|
| Mr James Welsh                           | Director of Programmes (Joint)                                       |
| Ms Anna Banfield                         | Director of Programmes (Joint)                                       |
| Ms Isabel Dakyns                         | Tutor: Advocacy, Professional Ethics; Module Leader: Opinion Writing |
| Mr Ishan Kolhatkar                       | Tutor: Module Leader: Crime, Advocacy                                |
| Ms Chris Kessling                        | Tutor: Crime, Advocacy; Module Leader: Professional Ethics           |
| Ms Noemi Byrd                            | Tutor: Advocacy, JR, Professional Ethics, Written Skills             |
| Ms Jennie Osborne                        | Tutor: Crime, Advocacy, Professional Ethics                          |
| Mr Stephen Wells                         | Tutor: Crime, Advocacy, Professional Ethics                          |

## **Rationale for the visit**

The visit was held as part of the Bar Standards Board's annual programme of visits to providers of the Bar Professional Training Course to monitor the quality and standards of the course and to determine whether the course is being delivered in accordance with the requirements of the BSB's Bar Professional Training Course Handbook.

The panel was provided in advance with key documentation, including the provider's Annual Reflective Review 2013-14, copies of External Examiner reports for the relevant year, the most recent BSB visit report and other relevant information.

During the visit the panel saw teaching rooms, social spaces, and learning resources areas. The panel met, separately, with management, course team and students. Members of the panel also observed four classes. The report reflects the findings of the panel and is informed by both documentation and visit.

## **Context: the Provider**

BPP was established in 1976 and was acquired by Apollo Global Education in 2009. It was granted degree awarding powers in 2007 and full University title in 2013. BPP Law School is one of four schools that make up BPP University. The Bar Professional Training Course is run on three sites: in London, Leeds and Manchester. Each site is approved separately by the Bar Standards Board to deliver the BPTC. BPP London delivered the Bar Vocational Course from 1997-2010, and has delivered the Bar Professional Training Course from 2010, along with a range of other law and professional programmes.

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

Adherence to course aims and philosophy seemed sound and standards secure.

The management team was invited to describe what was felt to be most distinctive about the BPTC at BPP London. BPP University lays great emphasis on the fact that it sees itself as the University for professionals and it is a professional training route rather than a continuation of an undergraduate academic experience. To that end, BPP has cultivated its credibility as a place for training professionals by stressing the practitioner experience of its staff, and their ongoing links with practice. BPP also seeks to track the evolving nature of practice through developing initiatives such as the 'Practice Ready' certificate (to be launched in May 2015) – an optional in-house certification which aims to develop in students all the attributes that Chambers would like new barristers to have but which are not currently formally part of the BPTC, such as commercial awareness, in-depth legal research skills, and specialist face-to-face skills such as dealing with vulnerable witnesses. This kind of initiative is believed to enable students to enhance their employability on completion of the course. A Careers Guarantee has also been introduced which offers students the opportunity to take a whole range of courses at BPP free if they do not obtain pupillage within six months of completing the course. Other courses include the LPC, the New York Bar, and the MBA.

## **2. Quality management systems**

The Student Staff Liaison Group meets three times during the course and additional meetings can be scheduled when there is a need. There are 22 groups of students with a representative from each group attending the SSLG, along with 6 staff. Each group selects its own representative and training documents are available on the virtual learning environment, including video clips indicating how to canvass fellow students for their views. Ideally issues should be submitted in advance so that they can be put up on the Whiteboard, but in practice this rarely happens. After the meetings, minutes are placed on the VLE, with an announcement to say that they are there, and representatives should feed back to their respective groups. Minutes also go to the Law School Board so that the wider University sees what issues are coming out of the BPTC.

Although the system for Student Staff Liaison appears to be sound in theory, in practice it appears to

be very challenging to engage such a large cohort of students adequately and disseminate the results of the meetings effectively. The panel therefore **recommended** that management give thought to the effectiveness of the Student Staff Liaison meetings, taking into account the size of the cohort, the need to involve students adequately in this key quality assurance process, and to ensure that all students are aware of actions taken as a result of issues raised, as well as how to escalate matters of substance where necessary. (**Recommendation 1**)

### 3. Staffing and staff development

Teaching staff reported that the joint leadership of the BPTC worked well, and that there was a good sense of collegiality across the team, who were all located on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor. There are module leaders for each subject, mostly made up of London tutors, and a Programme Leader on each of the three sites in London, Leeds and Manchester. Tutors felt that there was easy and effective communication across sites, and that students were clear about who were their points of contact on course-related matters.

Staff workload was generally 10 classes per week in the first two terms, but the teaching load would go down if other responsibilities were taken on. Advocacy tutors had a greater number of classes over the year, so had a proportionately lighter marking load. The third term was the intensive marking period, with the additional challenge of needing to move papers around three cities. Tutors commented that much time would be saved if this could be done electronically.

Staff who act as personal tutors have two groups of 12 personal tutees each. As a general rule, personal tutors are also class tutors for students in their personal tutor groups. It was noted that some students liked personal tutors to be pro-active, and others actively did not wish to be approached.

Personal tutors are involved in following up poor attendance. Attendance sheets are filled in at each class and the data input into a spreadsheet. Tutors are notified by an administrator if there are concerns. In addition to BSB attendance requirements, there is strict monitoring of those on Tier 4 visas to meet UK Visa and Immigration rules.

New freelance staff are encouraged to undertake observations of classes. One freelancer had in fact recently become a permanent member of the team.

Staff were very much encouraged and expected to maintain their professional links. BPP paid their practising fees and funds were available for staff development and training, for example through CrimeLine. Staff had no problems in fulfilling the minimum requirement for 5 days' staff development each year.

Staff are required to observe each other and to be observed in teaching. Additional external observations had taken place when the Directors of Programmes had invited the Inns to watch some Advocacy sessions.

### 4. Curriculum content and structure

Students reported a good level of satisfaction with their learning experience from the point of view of content and structure.

The panel was keen to understand how consistency across full-time and part-time modes is achieved. The same materials are used, and the same tutors and markers; the same module leaders also work across modes. There is a part-time Programme Leader and a part-time Student Staff Liaison Group is operated in addition to the full-time SSLG.

## **5. Admissions and student profile**

Teaching staff were of the view that the quality of students admitted to the course had risen and that the more robust English Language requirements had helped. Extensive use was made of Skype interviews as well as staff visiting to conduct interviews in country, for example in Bangladesh where over 100 interviews had taken place. This had resulted in a very significant change to the student profile where confidence could be more readily placed in selection of the right students through the admissions process. Staff were, however, very clear that they believed too much filtering too early at the admissions stage could potentially block access to the profession. Tutors felt that as a skills-based course, classification of degree should only be one factor in determining suitability for the BPTC. The management team confirmed that there was now a more sophisticated approach to looking at degree classifications: it was now possible to distinguish between a 'low' and a 'high' 2:2, but this was only one aspect of selection as noted above. Students with non-traditional profiles would not be barred from access if they had other distinguishing factors, such as having already worked at a high level in another jurisdiction. References would also be looked at carefully where degree classification alone was insufficient information on which to base a decision. Management also confirmed that the English Language requirements were working well and that no student had been required to withdraw from the current cohort.

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

Students felt that their tutors had a good level of practitioner experience to support their learning, and also expressed themselves to be satisfied that there was a good range of materials including digital resources to enhance their learning experience.

Staff were asked about their strategies for keeping students engaged in class, particularly in Conferencing and Advocacy where there might be a tendency for students not performing to disengage. Each tutor tended to find their own imaginative ways of dealing with this, such as asking the non-performing students to spot leading questions or to form a 'jury'.

Module audit forms indicating things that worked and things that did not work are filled in after each session and reviewed at the end of each teaching week. The Module Leader sees both staff and student feedback. This mode of working operates across sites so the views of staff and students in Leeds and Manchester are taken into account on an equal basis with London.

An interactive Criminal manual has been written collaboratively by five tutors using around 120,000 words of text and 40 minutes of film, some of which comprises footage of discussions with ex-offenders. The film is in segments so that sections can easily be replaced for updating purposes. The development of such innovative materials is intended to help bridge the pedagogic gap between academic learning and professional practice.

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

Students were asked whether they understood marking criteria clearly to enable them to perform better in future. In skills subjects feedback and guidance was felt to be clear, but in other subjects students sometimes found it harder to determine what the objective criteria were. Staff indicated that the marking criteria were on all the feedback sheets, and were also referred to in small group sessions. In Professional Ethics, it was made very explicit how marks were being allocated as this was vital to developing good exam technique. All staff who teach Professional Ethics have written questions for use in class.

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

The panel was pleased to meet with a group of 15 students, including four from the part-time mode. Students had come from a wide range of backgrounds, including undergraduate degrees in the UK and overseas, and having studied LLB, LLM or QLD first. Their reasons for choosing BPP London included reputation of the provider, a good record of students going on to gain pupillage, the scholarships on offer, the specific option modules such as international law, the number of advocacy

classes, the online lectures, the fact that the part-time mode runs at a weekend rather than in the week, and the professional ethos that some students sought as an alternative to feeling as if the course was a continuation of university. The Career Guarantee was also seen as very attractive. Students felt that the course had so far lived up to their expectations, and in some respects exceeded it, for example in the extent to which it was felt that course designers and tutors were constantly innovating to make teaching more engaging and imaginative. The time-tabling was felt to be efficient and it was thought that the subjects interlocked well.

Students reported that some materials had been sent out three weeks in advance of Induction but even so it had come as something of a shock to discover the volume of materials waiting for them in lockers, and how much work was expected during the first week. Some full-time students had thought that the first week would be all about Induction, and had not anticipated the immediate start to the course. Part-time students reported on their Induction weekend they had spent time getting to know tutors, and had met as a whole cohort in a large group session. Part-time students reported smooth administration and quick responses from their Course Leader to any queries; they believed that care was taken to ensure that they were as well supported as their full-time counterparts.

There had been some difficulties with the new VLE in the early stages of the course, but students had been warned that this might be the case, and the problems were resolved by Reading Week.

Financial administration was highlighted as a central service that caused students a great deal of stress and frustration. There were instances where students had been accused of not paying fees when fees had in fact been paid, or where the Finance office had failed to register loan and scholarship agreements adequately. The threatening tone of the communications received when students had done nothing wrong was felt to be an unhelpful and unnecessary cause of stress. The panel was concerned to learn that students had not felt able to raise concerns with tutors for fear that this would reflect badly on them, and they had been trying to deal with things themselves. When the panel raised this as a general concern with the management team, management acknowledged that they were aware of problems with financial administration and that plans were in hand to address this. It was thought that some of the difficulties arose from the fact that at present the advice and credit functions were handled by the same team, and in future this might be split. This was compounded by the fact that different parts of the company used a variety of software packages and communication between systems was not always smooth. The management team was clear that any student encountering difficulties would be helped without hesitation to expedite matters with the Finance team, without any less being thought of them for asking for help. The panel **recommended** that management take immediate action to acknowledge to students that the Finance systems are in a state of transition, and actively encourage any students who are currently encountering difficulties in their interactions with the Finance team to come forward to their personal tutors for assistance. (**Recommendation 2**). The panel further **recommended** that problems with Finance systems be resolved in time for the next cohort. (**Recommendation 3**).

Teaching staff noted a trend towards students being more active in voicing their concerns, but sometimes waiting until it was too late – this comment was of a general nature and not related to the Finance issue specifically.

Management noted that other aspects of central administration were working effectively, for instance the examinations office which checked student qualifications and was responsible for centralised examinations administration.

All students, including part-time, are allocated a personal tutor. Students' perceptions of whether it was up to personal tutors to contact them, or up to the student to initiate contact varied. Some students reported tutors making pro-active contact, whilst others were found to be more 'hands-off'. Students did not necessarily feel the need for a greater level of pro-active contact, but found this to be a somewhat inconsistent approach. The management team indicated that the variation might also be due to how much teaching contact a personal tutor had with their tutees. With knowledge and written skills tutors, they were likely to see their tutees every week in class, whereas contact with other tutors and their tutees would be less frequent. It was noted that there is an objective around pastoral care in staff appraisals. Whilst it is understood that students may vary in their level of need

for accessing the personal tutor system, it is important for there to be common understanding across students and teaching staff of what is available and how it can be accessed. The panel therefore **recommended** that expectations of both students and tutors be managed with regard to the personal tutoring system and how it operates. (**Recommendation 4**)

Students are able to access Careers support from the point of acceptance of offer. One student reported having arranged help with a pupillage application and mock interview before the start of the course. The central careers service was very accessible but for real in-depth advice, students would generally tend to talk to tutors with practitioner experience. Tutors were generous in such support or in referring requests on where impartial feedback was appropriate.

Students are required to do a minimum of 5 hours of Pro Bono work. The group that the panel met indicated that there was a wide range of Pro Bono work available to both full-time and part-time students, and some had opted to do more than the minimum requirement. Although it was felt that much of the Pro Bono work was geared towards LPC students, it was still possible to choose from a good variety, or for students to make their own arrangements, for example with the Citizens' Advice Bureau. FRU work was also possible.

Students reported that there had been some problems with lateness and that initially they felt that the attendance rule was perhaps not being enforced, but this was raised with tutors and the problem had been resolved. Students had witnessed tutors enforcing the attendance rule robustly in recent times.

#### **9. Learning resources (Library and IT)**

No learning resources issues were raised. The panel viewed the Law School library and BPTC study spaces and social areas, all of which seemed well resourced.

#### **10. Equality and diversity**

No issues of equality and diversity were noted.

#### **Additional comments**

The panel noted that the Banner student records system has yet to be implemented. This will include integrated systems for student records including Finance and Administration from the first point at which an applicant makes contact with the University up to their first three years in work. BPP is being cautious about implementing the new system as thorough testing is needed before it goes live. As implementation has been anticipated for some time, it should be noted that this will no doubt be a point of interest for future visiting panels should there be significant further delay.

#### **Good practice, distinguishing features**

The panel wished to commend:

1. The ethos of continual improvement and innovation that is apparent in materials, including digital resources, initiatives such as the 'practice-ready' certificate, and the introduction of the Career Guarantee.
2. The effectiveness of the management team, which promotes a culture of collegiality across the wider teaching team.
3. The evolving Admissions strategy and robust implementation of the English Language requirement.
4. The recognition of the importance of ensuring parity between full-time and part-time modes of study.

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

Continuing approval with recommendations.

| <b>Recommendations</b>                           |   |
|--|---|
| The following recommendations must be addressed: |   |
| Recommendation 1                                 | Give thought to the effectiveness of the Student Staff Liaison meetings, taking into account the size of the cohort, the need to involve students adequately in this key quality assurance process, and to ensure that all students are aware of actions taken as a result of issues raised, as well as how to escalate matters of substance where necessary. |
| Recommendation 2                                 | Take immediate action to acknowledge to students that the Finance systems are in a state of transition, and actively encourage any students who are currently encountering difficulties in their interactions with the Finance team to come forward to their personal tutors for assistance.  |
| Recommendation 3                                 | Resolve the problems with the Finance systems in time for the 2015-16 cohort.   |
| Recommendation 4                                 | Manage and clarify expectations of both students and tutors with regard to the personal tutoring system and how it operates.  |

**Response by the Provider (maximum one page)**

We are grateful to the panel for their careful review and recognition of good practice.

We will review the conduct of Staff Student Liaison Committee meetings with a large cohort and consider ways in which we might make these more effective.

We are working with our Finance team to improve the student experience.

We will provide further training to tutors in relation to their role as personal tutors. We will also look at ways of better managing student expectations of their personal tutor.