

**BAR
STANDARDS
BOARD**

REGULATING BARRISTERS

**Bar Professional Training Course
BPP Law School, Manchester
Report of visit held on 9 March 2015**

Name of Institution	Date of Visit/Meeting
BPP Law School, Manchester BPP University	9 March 2015

Title of Course/award	Nature/status of course
Bar Professional Training Course	Accredited BPTC

Numbers/modes approved	Dates of course
Approved for: 48 full-time (48 enrolled 2014-15)	September 2014 to July 2015

Panel Members	Role and area of primary responsibility
Dr Victoria Stec	Temporary Education Manager, BSB (Chair)
Mr David Fleming	BPTC Sub-Committee Member, BSB; Education and Training Committee Member, BSB
Mr Adam Solomon	Barrister; Qualifications Committee Member, BSB
Ms Gemma Davies	BPTC Course Leader (part-time mode), University of Northumbria; Provider representative

Provider Team attending the event	Role and area of primary responsibility
Mr Mark Keith	BPTC Programme Leader, Manchester
Mr James Welsh	Director of Programmes (Joint)
Ms Tricia Chatterton	Senior Academic Manchester
Ms Clare Jones,	BPTC Lecturer
Ms Eleanor Hutchison	BPTC Lecturer
Mr Peter Wolfenden	BPTC Lecturer

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

recent BSB visit report and other relevant information.

During the visit the panel had the opportunity to tour the premises and to meet, separately, with management, course team and students. Members of the panel also observed one class. The report reflects the findings of the panel 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 Manchester has offered the Bar Course since 2013, 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 distinctive about the BPTC at BPP Manchester. BPP Manchester was described as having all the benefits of a large provider with the underpinning resources, as well as the collegiate ethos of a small centre with only 48 BPTC students. The Programme Leader personally teaches all students, and knows them well. The course at all BPP sites is delivered using identical materials, making full use of the Virtual Learning Environment with materials designed around the virtual town of Gladbury. Thus tried and tested materials with high quality tutor notes are used; comments from teaching staff on all sites including Manchester feed into the cycle of continuous improvement, and peer observations ensure quality of teaching.

2. Quality management systems

Although in practice students often resolve concerns by talking with their tutor or personal tutor, as with all other BPP centres delivering the BPTC, a site-specific student-staff liaison committee is the formal forum through which students may raise concerns. The group of students that the panel met reported having four representatives who gathered views via a Facebook group to take to the student-staff forum.

The Manchester Programme Leader relates to BPP nationally through his participation in a weekly Programme Leaders' meeting, where he is able to represent views of his team. The Programme Leader also attends the BSB Providers' meetings and feeds back information to his team. At teaching team level, tutors participate in a weekly teleconference with national colleagues and attend twice-yearly national team meetings in London. Audit forms from tutors and students are filled in at the end of each small group session. Tutors feed into module development and review through these mechanisms.

The teaching team were aware of the Annual Reflective Review, and although they had not contributed to writing it, they could feed in comments through the Programme Leader. They were aware of External Examiners' reports but not involved in drafting responses, and had not seen the responses that were made. The panel therefore **recommended** that management ensure that teaching staff are more fully involved in quality assurance processes, both in terms of their awareness of, and input into, responses to External Examiners' reports, and awareness of, and input into, the drafting of the Annual Reflective Review. (**Recommendation 3**)

3. Staffing and staff development

The management team reported that there is a budget of £750 per person available for a whole range of staff development activities, and that staff are also supported in returning to practice during the summer, or in practising part-time. One tutor works part-time and is in practice on two days of the week. With some adjustments, such as only taking five-day cases over the summer, this has proved

manageable. The Programme Leader is training as a mediator to enable him to teach ReDOC; staff are also encouraged to undertake the Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Education, which will be a contractual requirement for all new staff to do in future.

The Programme Leader conducts regular 1:1 meetings with all staff, and class observations twice a year. Some cross-programme observations also take place with the LPC and LLB, as this helps promote best practice. All staff participate in a minimum of two peer observations each year. Induction is provided in relation to both the nature of the course and to teaching styles. Teaching a sample class in front of peers and getting feedback is also part of the Induction process.

The teaching team spoke of a very collegial working environment where staff were able to get to know students well and to provide them with a good level of support, which was easier with a small cohort. Tutors felt that it was particularly important to provide support in the transition from the academic environment of an undergraduate degree to the professional training environment of the BPTC, especially during the first term. Tutors were allocated 12 students each as personal tutees, with whom they had a minimum of three meetings per year; however all staff operated an open door policy and did not place limits on the number of meetings.

4. Curriculum content and structure

Students reported having access to a weekly podcast on Professional Ethics in addition to the small group sessions, although some students had initially not realized that the podcasts were there. Podcasts were thought to be useful revision tools. Teaching staff indicated that they would try to raise awareness of the existence of podcasts through the personal tutor sessions, but that the Virtual Learning Environment explained clearly how the module worked.

With regard to the Criminal syllabus, students reported that a Criminal Manual had been written by BPP staff and although this was useful, it was felt that the first draft had been very rushed and a number of corrections had had to be issued via the Virtual Learning Environment. The teaching team confirmed that revisions were now complete, and also confirmed that the manual was used to supplement Archbold, but not to replace it, and that Archbold remained the key text.

Students felt that overall the amount of material that had to be covered was vast, and that they risked burn-out or being tempted to cut corners. They felt that April was too early for examinations and that the course as a whole was compressed into too short a timescale. Although they did enjoy the course, they would prefer if it could be stretched out over a longer period, with an earlier start or later finish being desirable, or even continuing with Civil and Crime during the Options in the third term. However it was understood that some of these things were prescribed by the BSB. It was also noted that it was very challenging that there were only 8 days between the end of the centralised assessments and the closing of the Pupillage Gateway, and the danger was that concentration on pupillage application forms had to be sacrificed for examination preparation.

The teaching team was very keenly aware of the level of stress that students felt over centralised assessment and the wide scope of the curriculum, however they felt that it was not an unmanageable amount of strain. Personal tutor meetings were scheduled at the start of the second term specifically to check how students were coping, and the level of challenge and expectations placed on students were made explicit from the outset.

5. Admissions and student profile

The panel learned that BPP Manchester is becoming increasingly competitive as a destination for BPTC candidates, and a high threshold has to be met for entry. 26% of the current cohort has a first class honours degree. The BPTC Programme Leader at Manchester personally considers all applications against BPP admissions criteria and also checks applications for quality of written English. In 2013-14 over-recruitment following a higher than anticipated conversion of offers to acceptances had led to a triggered visit from the BSB. The current cohort has filled the exact number

of validated places with 48 students. Recruitment for academic year 2015-16 has attracted high quality students and BPP Manchester is able to be highly selective. In addition to this, 13 fewer offers have been made than in the previous year, to give additional leeway on final numbers in the event of a high conversion rate, with the aim of avoiding any further over-recruitment.

The teaching team commented that there had been a marked increase in the quality of students since the first intake in 2013, and they attributed this to the close interest the Programme Leader took in scrutinising all applications. It was also thought to be possible that some of the better students had stayed away during the first year of operation but that now that BPP Manchester was establishing a track record as a provider, students had more confidence in applying there.

The panel was keen to know how the enhanced English Language requirements were being applied. No language problems were reported in Manchester in the current cohort. Measures for assessing language competence at the start of the course had included an ice-breaker activity where students were put in pairs and asked to introduce their partner to the class; a CV/letter writing exercise, and a 1:1 meeting with a personal tutor who asked a list of questions based on IELTS questions. It was also noted that more use was being made of in-country interviews. A BPTC tutor had been to Bangladesh to conduct two days of face-to-face interviews, and this had been very effective. Recruitment overseas was actively promoted, including through the use of agents, and the resulting diversity of the cohort was greatly valued. Manchester is a popular undergraduate destination for a large number of international students, so the opportunity to take the BPTC there is attractive. 21% of the current cohort is international. The majority of international students wished to return to their home jurisdiction to practise. BPP's strong international connections were also beneficial to students, for example a Malaysian law firm had chosen BPP as a partner to assist them in recruitment.

6. Teaching and Learning (knowledge and skills areas)

The panel observed a drafting class, which was the penultimate session before the examination. The session therefore focussed closely on examination technique. Students appeared well prepared and engaged, and the panel was of the view that it was an excellent session.

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

The Civil syllabus includes revision lectures for each small group session and a sample answer. Students found this very useful, and would ideally like to have the same for Crime, although it was acknowledged that the unseen questions for Crime were trying to reflect the examination circumstances better. The teaching team confirmed that the difference in approach was one of pedagogy, and that it was felt to be very valuable to use unseen questions. In the Civil questions, the sample Short Answer Question (SAQ) is broken down with the answer showing where marks are allocated, and this is available on the Virtual Learning Environment after the session. With Crime, the tutor goes through the questions in class, with students being expected to make notes on the answers as they go. Students in groups then put these notes on the Whiteboard, and the tutor checks whether they are correct. This was therefore a more interactive method than with Civil, and was also consistent with the necessity in practice of being able to make judgement calls alone.

8. Student support and quality of student experience

The management team indicated that the course had strong support from the local Bar. A pupillage panel had been organised, including current and recent pupils and tenants talking about their experiences; St James Chambers, Lincoln House Chambers and Exchange Chambers amongst others had all participated in events in the past year including sessions on commercial awareness; other chambers from Liverpool and London had also been involved. It was therefore believed that students were being provided with ample opportunities to meet a good range of current practitioners. Students were well supported around the opening of the Pupillage gateway, for instance if they had an interview, a panel would be set up to do a mock interview, including someone with experience of being on a pupillage committee.

The current cohort of students will be the first to come under the new BPP 'Career Guarantee'. This initiative means that any student who does not have pupillage six months after graduating may do almost any other course at BPP free of charge. Options include cross-qualifying on the LPC, which can be done in 5 months. It was noted that it would be interesting to see whether being cross-qualified makes people more employable. Students are already encouraged to make the most of the transferable skills acquired during the BPTC when considering potential employment routes.

Students benefit from a careers service which is run as a central national service, but there are staff on site at Manchester 5 days a week. Students are invited to engage through drop-in days and CV clinics. BPP has access to a Senior Clerk whose experience is of great benefit to students and who reaches students outside London through road shows and e-mail chat.

The panel was pleased to meet with a group of around 16 students. Most had come to the BPTC from the LLB, although one had done a GDL. A significant number of the students were local to Manchester but their overriding reason for choosing BPP Manchester as a provider was the strong sense of the 'personal touch' and the sense of being treated as individuals. During an open day, the Programme Leader had shown students round personally, and had displayed what students found to be an impressive level of attention to detail by sometimes referring to specific points they had made in their individual applications. Students also liked the small cohort and the fact that advocacy was taught in groups of four. One student had chosen Manchester in favour of London precisely because of the very different experience of being in a small cohort.

The students felt that while some aspects of the course had proved more theoretical than they had anticipated, the institution had certainly lived up to their expectations with high quality teaching and excellent support. When one tutor had left, the transition to new arrangements had been seamless and students had been kept informed.

Management indicated that there had been some problems with the Finance system, but that they were not aware of any continuing in the current year. Students' views on central systems were that the main problem was with Finance. Apart from general slowness, there had been serious problems when students had been accused of not paying when in fact they had, and their account had been locked. In relation to Finance, communications across London and Manchester were felt to be poor and had caused considerable frustration and worry.

The panel was concerned to note the problems that students had been having with the Finance system, particularly as this had also been noted during the recent Annual Monitoring Visit to BPP London, at which time the panel had been advised that the systems issues were known and that plans were in hand to address them in future. The Manchester panel therefore chose to make two identical recommendations to those made by the visiting panel in London, which were to **recommend** 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 1**), and also to **recommend** that the problems with the Finance system be resolved in time for the 2015-16 cohort (**Recommendation 2**).

Students spoke with much appreciation of their tutors and Programme Leader. Tutors went well beyond the call of duty, tailored feedback to each individual, and really cared about each student's progress. One student on a Learning Support Contract reported feeling very comfortable talking about their needs with tutors and the Programme Leader. The Programme Leader's weekly update e-mail was also much appreciated by all.

Students particularly enjoyed feeling in touch with the local Bar and had found the extra-curricular activities stimulating. Notwithstanding the Careers Guarantee, all wished to pursue careers as barristers and were not doing the course with a view to any other career. Students particularly appreciated being taught by practitioners currently in practice. All of the students that the panel met would recommend BPP Manchester as a provider to others.

9. Learning resources (Library and IT)

The panel had the opportunity to view the BPTC study space, which is reached through the main library, and also the common area, which is located near the canteen. Both spaces were being well used by students.

General IT support is provided at a global level and this was reported to work well, with no time-zone restrictions on availability of support. There is also on-site support for technical issues with classroom equipment.

10. Equality and diversity

No issues of equality and diversity were noted or raised.

Additional comments

None

Good practice, distinguishing features

The panel wished to commend:

1. The responsive and committed tutors providing strong support for students both in and out of the classroom.
2. The effective and strong leadership of the Programme Leader.
3. The collegial ethos that exists at Manchester across staff and students.
4. The focus on quality rather than quantity of intake in the evolving Admissions strategy.
5. The fact that although this is only the second year of operation at the site, the course appears to be thriving and becoming well established.

Conclusions: recommendation on accreditation/approval/continuing approval

The panel recommends continuing approval with recommendations.

NB Recommendations 1 & 2 below are identical to those raised on the BPP London visit of 26 February 2015 as they relate to central systems rather than to the specific site.

Recommendations

The following recommendations must be addressed:

Recommendation 1	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	Resolve the problems with the Finance systems in time for the 2015-16 cohort.
Recommendation 3	Ensure that teaching staff are more fully involved in quality assurance processes, both in terms of their awareness of, and input into, responses to External Examiners' reports, and awareness of, and input into, the drafting of the Annual Reflective Review.

Response by the Provider (maximum one page)

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

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

Going forward we will ensure that teaching staff are more engaged in quality assurance processes, in particular the response to external examiner reports and the drafting of the Annual Reflective Review.