

**BAR
STANDARDS
BOARD**

REGULATING BARRISTERS

**Bar Professional Training Course
City Law School
Report of visit held on 25 February 2015**

Name of Institution	Date of Visit/Meeting
City Law School	25 February 2015

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

Numbers/modes approved	Dates of course
<p>Approved for:</p> <p>420 FT for the academic year 2014/15 60 PT for the academic year 2014/15 348 FT enrolled and 30 PT enrolled</p>	September 2014 to July 2015

Panel Members	Role and area of primary responsibility
Ms Emily Windsor (Chair)	Barrister, Chair of the BPTC Sub-Committee
Dr Simon Thornton-Wood	Director of Education and Training, BSB
Ms Poonam Sharma	Vocational Training Administrator, BSB
Mr Timothy Godfrey	Barrister member of the BPTC Sub-Committee
Ms Joanne Lewthwaite	BPTC Course Director at Manchester Metropolitan University

Provider Team	Role and area of primary responsibility
Professor Stuart Sime	FT Course Leader, BPTC
Mr Marcus Soanes	PT Course Leader, BPTC
Ms Alison Wolfgarten	Drafting Tutor
Ms Catherine Hill	Conference Skills Co-ordinator
Ms Joanna Moss	Civil Litigation Tutor
Mr Stephen Halsall	Criminal Litigation Tutor
Ms Caitriona Hegarty	PT Deputy Course Director

Rationale for the visit

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 Panel was provided in advance with key documentation including the Law School's most recent Annual Reflective Review, copies of the last 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. Members of the Panel also had the opportunity to observe some teaching in Civil and Criminal Advocacy, Criminal Evidence and Civil Litigation.

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

Context: The HEI/Provider

City University of London was established in 1894 as the Northampton Institute and obtained University status in 1966. City Law School (formerly the Inns of Court School of Law) delivered the Bar Vocational Course from 1989 to 2009, with the course forming part of a suite of related law programmes. The BVC was replaced from 2010 with the Bar Professional Training Course.

1. Adherence to course aims, philosophy and standards

Adherence to the aims, philosophy and standards of the Bar Professional Training Course appeared sound. Comments regarding specific areas for improvement are detailed in the recommendations below.

2. Quality management systems

The School's quality management systems seemed sound and the annual monitoring documentation was helpful to the Panel.

The system for addressing matters raised by External Examiners appeared to be effective. Responses to issues raised by External Examiners are considered by the City University Quality Assurance Committees, including the Board of Studies.

The Panel saw the minutes of Staff-Student Liaison Committee (SSLC); there are three meetings per academic year, one per term for the full-time cohort. For the part-time SSLC there are four virtual meetings. The minutes for the SSLC clearly illustrated the concerns students had raised and the actions table indicated the extent to which matters had been resolved.

3. Staffing and staff development

Evidence of a thorough programme of staff development opportunities was indicated in the Annual Reflective Review, with staff attending a good range of workshops and conferences. The range of Equality & Diversity related activities was noted.

The continuing efforts by staff to maintain practice experience was well documented.

Students were clearly very impressed with the quality of teaching by many of the staff, though indicated some concern about a perceived variance in quality or overall consistency. There was a student perception that tutors who retained significant links with practice had more to offer.

4. Curriculum content and structure

The Panel considered that the curriculum content and structure seemed sound.

Some continuing concern was expressed by students about the weekly structure of the programme creating periods of pressure that might be alleviated.

PT students observed that there is an imbalance between the first and second year's programmes, with significantly more of the course content delivered in the second year. Students reported that the first year's programme inadequately prepared them for the rigours of the second year. The management team were aware of the issue, but considered there to be constraints on the extent to which the programme content could be redistributed.

The School has introduced an innovative 'Programme Overview Browser' to support staff and students, providing a helpful aid to planning study.

5. Admissions and student profile

The Law School continues with a policy of raising admissions criteria year on year, having undertaken its own analysis of the predictive value of a first degree in relation to success in the BPTC. A large majority of the students have a minimum of an upper-second class degree. Nevertheless, the School continues to give consideration to applicants with a lower second-class degree where they meet certain rigorous criteria.

The Panel commended the evidence of development in the admissions policy, supported by analysis of progression and evidence of regard for diversity.

Notwithstanding the improvements that had reduced the risk of a 'weak tail' of performance on the course over successive years, some concerns continued to be expressed about English language ability in relation to the FT course. The Panel heard evidence that measures were in place to identify and address such problems early in the programme, but **recommended** that further consideration should be given to assessing English language ability at admission.

6. Teaching and Learning (knowledge and skills areas)

Overall, the Panel was presented with evidence of sound teaching and learning.

The School continues to adjust its approach to teaching to meet the requirements of centralised assessment in the knowledge-based subjects.

The Panel noted a particular concern amongst students that they were guided to a variety of styles for presentation of their work whilst gaining an impression that a particular house style was expected. Staff emphasised that the examples they provided with teaching materials were not templates; nevertheless, the Panel advised that more might be done to build students' confidence in the development of their style in, for instance, opinion writing.

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

Students expressed a desire for more mock examinations under realistic conditions, marked by staff, to help them prepare effectively. The staff reported that they were exploring a number of approaches, such as combining online MCQs that students can undertake between classes and classroom-based SAQs.

There was a lack of clarity over feedback on assessments, with students noting that feedback is anonymous, making it difficult to follow up with the staff concerned. The Panel was advised that teaching staff should be filling in a designated form when marking students' assessments and the name of the marker should always be included on the form.

The Panel **recommended** that mock examinations should be reviewed, to strengthen the contribution they make to the students' preparation.

8. Student support and quality of student experience

The Panel noted that stress had been raised as a matter of concern, and students commented that they found it difficult to access appropriate support services. The management team reported that mental health amongst students was a matter of considerable importance at the University, with a review in place to assess the issue. Comparison had been made between the BPTC and other courses, identifying that the course placed no unusual degree of stress upon students, but the wider problem was recognised and support services were in place.

Counselling services are located at a different university site to the BPTC – Northampton Square – which the Panel was advised gave advantage in encouraging students to access support anonymously. Additionally, a drop-in service was available at lunchtimes, and services were integrated with local NHS support.

The Panel **recommended** that more effective promotion of available mental health and support services to students should be developed, and a coherent approach should be made evident in the way services are presented.

PT students were notably impressed with the quality of their course. However, they were concerned about a lack of access to extracurricular opportunities such as pupillage lectures, which had been timetabled to coincide with their teaching programme. The course management team recognised the problem, which is challenging to address within the limitations of timetables, and advised that they tried to ensure that lectures were recorded where possible.

The Panel **recommended** that the comparability of learning experience for the PT students with that of those on the FT programme should be assessed.

9. Learning resources (Library and IT)

The Panel was impressed by the technology used to aid students learning, and was shown the new Programme Overview Browser which had been introduced to support planning by both staff and students.

Some teething problems had been identified, but overall the use of IT services was reported to be effective.

Students expressed a wish to do exams via computer, especially for modules such as Drafting. This has been reflected in City's action plan.

The panel also was pleased to see that the library had been recently refurbished.

10. Equality and diversity

There were no concerns raised about equality and diversity.

Observations

Observation 1

The Panel encouraged the Law School in its development of a rigorous admissions policy, linked to analysis of progression and a more robust system of screening those with 2:2s.

Good practice, distinguishing features

The Panel wished to commend City Law School on the following:

- The provision of some "inspirational" teaching
- An effective overall programme
- The high levels of student satisfaction among PT students
- The development of technology to aid students' learning

Conclusions: recommendation on accreditation/approval/continuing approval

Continuing approval (with recommendations) for the period September 2015 to July 2016.

Recommendations	
Recommendation 1	Further thought should be given to assessing English language ability at admission
Recommendation 2	More effective promotion of available mental health and support services to students should be developed. The policies should be more visible and there should be a more demonstrable level of engagement on the issue with the student body.
Recommendation 3	The comparability of learning experience for the PT students with that of those on the FT programme should be assessed
Recommendation 4	Mock examinations should be run in formal conditions replicating the actual exam experience and marked by tutors. Students should be given more consistent and meaningful feedback, to strengthen the contribution that such assessments make to students' preparation

Response by the Provider (maximum one page)

Recommendation 1

Our admissions criteria include an English Language proficiency requirement at IELTS 7.5 in all four parts of the test. We have existing policies in place to identify, at a very early stage of the course, any students who do not meet this requirement. We are considering the practicality of further steps that might be taken to assist in assessing the actual English language ability at the admissions stage. City University provides, in conjunction with a partner organisation, a suite of English support courses which are available to prospective students in advance of commencement of the BPTC.

Recommendation 2

Students at City University have available to them a high level of support through the University's counselling and mental health service. During 2014-15 the availability of this service was communicated to students through leaflets, discussions with student representatives, training given to all personal tutors, information provided at the School Office, links to all the student welfare and support services from the course VLE, guidance in the BPTC Handbook, the BPTC FAQ document and information on the University's website. One of the motivations for holding a professional programmes fresher's fair at Gray's Inn in September 2014 was to ensure students knew about the support services available, with staff in attendance from all the University's student support and student activity services. There is also a free Student Guide with useful information about City University, which (on page 6) has a page devoted to the counselling and mental health service. All these will run again in 2015-16, but we will give greater prominence to these both in introductory talks and throughout the year at the School Office.

Recommendation 3

The City Law School Part-time BPTC mirrors the FT programme in class content, the availability of options subjects, and in the tutors conducting classes. Scheduling changes made in 2014-15 give PT students the widest possible range of staff on the BPTC faculty to ensure parity of experience. A great deal of thought is given to extra-curricular activities. PT students have full access to internal competitions, pro bono activities, student:staff liaison etc. They are also invited to all talks, guest lectures and social events. There will inevitably be some events that certain students cannot attend. Some events can only be held when the speaker is available, and all students have other commitments. Part-time students are recognised as having more restricted availability than full-time students because they have classes when various evening events are organised, and often have commitments during the day as well. Efforts are made to arrange various events on a 2-year cycle and for certain events to take place on Saturdays, which to some extent alleviates the problem. PT student satisfaction with these arrangements and suggestions for others are regularly monitored by the PT BPTC director and addressed through the PT BPTC student:staff liaison committee.

Recommendation 4

We already hold invigilated Mock exams for the centrally set assessments, and formal feedback exercises replicating the assessment process in each of the skills subjects. Students' work in every subject is already marked by tutors, and with written feedback in the skills subjects. In the second formal feedback exercise the marking is anonymous to replicate the assessment (additional feedback is available from the regular class tutor). One of the main problems is the low take-up by students of the invigilated mocks in the centrally-set subjects. We have taken views from student representatives, and the almost universal feeling was that low take-up is as a result of the Mocks being too far in advance of the actual tests, before students had done enough revision. In 2015-16 we are moving the Mocks to dates far closer to the real exams.