

**BAR
STANDARDS
BOARD**

REGULATING BARRISTERS

**Bar Professional Training Course
BPP Law School, London
Report of Visit held on 2 February 2016**

Name of Institution	Date of Visit
BPP Law School, London BPP University	2 February 2016

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

Numbers/modes approved	Dates of course
Approved for: Full-time: 264 (249 enrolled) Part-time: 96 (69 enrolled)	September 2015 to July 2016

Panel Members	Role and area of primary responsibility
Dr Victoria Stec	Head of Training Supervision, BSB (Chair)
Ms Hayley Gault	Senior Training Supervision Officer, BSB
Mr Richard Davies	Lay
Ms Alexia Zimbler	Barrister
Ms Emma Piasecki	Director of Bar Programmes, Northumbria Law School

Provider Team attending the event	Role and area of primary responsibility
Mr James Welsh	Director of Programmes (Joint)
Ms Anna Banfield	Director of Programmes (Joint)
Ms Nichola Carter	Lecturer
Mr Joseph Wilkes	Head of Careers
Ms Hanne Stevens	Lecturer, Learning Support Officer
Ms Sonia Simms	Lecturer (Module Leader, Advocacy)
Mr Paul Wetton	Lecturer
Mr Andrew Maryniak	Lecturer
Ms Jennie Osborne	Lecturer, Assistant Programme Leader
Mr Stephen Wells	Lecturer

Christopher Kessling	Programme Leader for Part Time Course
Charlotte Wanendeya	Lecturer, FT Programme Leader
Andrew Chadwick	Deputy Dean and CEO

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 2014-15, 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 and social spaces. The panel met, separately, with management, course team and students. Members of the panel also observed classes in civil litigation and advocacy. 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 four sites: in London, Leeds, Birmingham 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

The panel found that the Bar Professional Training Course at BPP London was being delivered in accordance with the stated aims, philosophy and standards of the course.

The management team told the panel about some major changes that had been introduced over the past five years, including adding more Options subjects to ensure their range of Options is comprehensive and introducing a practice-ready qualification which includes legal research. They stated that they want to remain innovative (with both top-down and bottom-up innovation) but they feel they are planning for a future that is uncertain, give the current uncertainty of the Future Bar Training (FBT) project. The management team indicated that it would be a high priority to engage with this project to help shape the future of vocational training. The panel acknowledges that there is a level of uncertainty about the future but **recommends** that the management team ensures that their action plan takes consideration of developments for the benefit of the following year's cohort and is more explicit about priorities and practical steps to be taken (**Recommendation 1**).

2. Quality management systems

Teaching staff were invited to contribute within their areas of responsibility to the Annual Reflective Review provided to the BSB. Generally, however, the main responsibility for contribution would be management staff and module leaders, though they would be aware of feedback from other members of staff through regular team meetings. Teaching staff said that these team meetings gave them an opportunity pick up hints and tips from one another while also ensuring consistency when teaching the same sessions to different groups of students (including at other sites nationally). It also allows tutors to keep up to date with any changes in the law which might have an effect on the syllabus and respond to issues brought up by, for example, external examiners.

National team meetings take place twice yearly which include all BPTC staff across all sites and this is an opportunity to discuss more global issues.

3. Staffing and staff development

Each member of staff has a training budget allocated to them. The panel learned that several members of the course team have made use of this, for example by achieving a qualification in mediation which is now being taught on the course. Staff feel that professional development is encouraged and successful. They have the opportunity to discuss their development at annual appraisals with their line manager and they are expected to reflect upon any learning or training. There is a two-pronged approach to development, which encompasses the priorities of the organisation and the priorities of the individual. Tutors are encouraged to obtain the Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Education, which is paid for by the university. Several tutors have undertaken this and reported finding it interesting and useful.

Teaching staff believe that they are able to produce students with a strong potential to practise at the Bar because everyone on the team has experience themselves in practice and maintains strong links at the Bar. Some tutors remain in practice part-time which can involve working at the weekend in order to prepare for teaching in order to free up a day in practice during the week. However, there is more opportunity to practise during non-teaching months of the year. Tutors enjoy receiving feedback from students and using it for their personal development; they also feel that in working with students, particularly in practical skills, they are able to hone their own skills.

The teaching and careers teams told the panel that they feel they work very well together. The majority of the careers team have postgraduate qualifications in careers guidance and they can call on the teaching team for any technical guidance; for example, tutors help with conducting mock pupillage interviews.

4. Curriculum content and structure

The panel heard that teaching staff are seeking to review the way Professional Ethics is taught in order to address less than satisfactory performance in the centrally-assessed examination in the previous year. Tutors believe that the structure of the examination and the marking scheme are partly to blame and these views have been conveyed separately to the BSB. However, the teaching team also said that tutor notes have been updated and that there needs to be more of a focus on how to

pass the exam, though if this were to mean less of a focus on what would occur in practice it would be regrettable. A greater focus on Ethics might be accomplished by incorporating more ethical issues into other modules. The management team explained that they intend to introduce more webinars for compulsory subjects, including Ethics. The panel **recommends** that staff are explicit about steps they will take to address issues relating to pass rates of the Professional Ethics examinations (**Recommendation 2**).

5. Admissions and student profile

Students from overseas must either produce an IELTS or equivalent certificate to prove that they reach a score of 7.5 in all categories or they can have an interview with a member of staff. The panel learned that a tutor went to Bangladesh to perform interviews with potential students. Interviews can also be done in the UK and on Skype. Tutors feel that due to the interview process there are fewer issues with weak English language ability than in previous years. Tutors meet with students individually in Advocacy sessions early on in the term where language issues can be picked up. Tutors can refer students to Speech Geeks for voice communication classes which are subsidised. Tutors offer individual feedback sessions in written skills and can also give extra support outside of scheduled classes if students request it.

The students whom the panel met had some concerns about the level of English proficiency of some of their fellow students and the difference in education background. BPP's Annual Reflective Review stated that while many international students perform exceptionally well on the course, students from certain jurisdictions tend to perform less well across all BPP sites. Targeted support early in the course was needed to address this; teaching staff say that any issues with English language can be picked up and monitored via the personal tutor system.

6. Teaching and Learning (knowledge and skills areas)

The teaching observed by the panel was felt to be generally of a good, and, in one case, excellent standard. Tutors were engaging and students were well-prepared and involved. However, some of the sessions were felt to be potentially confusing for students; panel members could not see the rationale behind the use of aspects of criminal procedure in a civil trial in Advocacy sessions.

Students described tutors generally in glowing terms and praised the quality of teaching delivered on the course. They did feel that on occasion there was a seeming lack of consistency between tutors, where one would give a certain mark and another would give a much higher or lower mark for what seemed to be a similar performance and students could not understand why.

Several students whom the panel met said that the reason they chose to study at BPP was the fact that Advocacy is taught in classes of four rather than six. Students said that their advocacy classes sometimes went down to three due to illness and absence. Class sizes of fewer than four can have a knock-on effect in certain sessions as students may have to play roles twice but generally the fact that there is more time in the session to receive feedback was welcomed. They described feedback received in Advocacy sessions as "incredible". Groups rotate frequently so students get to witness a variety of different styles, though this does not happen for part-time students; on the part-time course, tutors rather than groups rotate. An exemplary recorded performance from an 'advocate of the week'

gets posted on the VLE for other students to see, though part time students do not yet have access to this.

Students said that other students being underprepared could have an effect on their learning experience, particularly if they were partnered with someone who did not do the work. They feel that many of their fellow students only prepare an hour before the session is due to start. The students are aware that they could be marked 'present but absent' if they are not sufficiently prepared but none of those whom the panel met have witnessed this happening yet.

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

The management team told the panel that they are experiencing an increase in the number of mitigating circumstances applications with regards to assessments.

The students whom the panel met expressed anxiety about the upcoming centrally assessed examinations. In particular, students were concerned that they might fail Professional Ethics; they described their sense of dread when thinking about the centrally assessed examinations. The panel noticed that students repeated almost verbatim the concerns expressed by teaching staff. While the panel accepts that tutors wish to convey a realistic sense of what the students will face, it was not appropriate to convey their personal opinions about perceived shortcomings of the form of assessment. The students seemed particularly fearful of the examinations and demoralised about the potential outcome. The panel therefore **recommends** that staff are mindful of the need to enable students to approach centrally assessed subjects with confidence (**Recommendation 3**).

Some students said they understood that Ethics involves a lot of self-learning and reflection by its nature and that it was introduced at the beginning of the year so they could recognise the ethical issues as they permeate the rest of the course. However, the students feel that ethical issues could be brought up more frequently and in a more structured fashion. They reported being concerned that there are only two further sessions to come in Ethics and that these would be consolidation sessions rather than learning new material.

8. Student support and quality of student experience

Some students whom the panel met felt that the administration of the course could be improved, but a similar number disagreed and said that the registration process had been easy. Some students had found it difficult to speak to a relevant person when trying to contact BPP via telephone, feeling the process was like being passed around a call centre, but others did not have this problem.

International students have a talk about Tier 4 visas and the associated obligations for attendance etc. at the beginning of term and there is a dedicated visa team at BPP which can help with any issues. Students raised concerns that students with visa issues that may have started the course later would have missed important things like the Ethics sessions. However, it was pointed out that these sessions were recorded and made available to absent students.

Students are aware that they can raise issues via the Student Staff Liaison group (SSL) but most of the students whom the panel met said that they would be more likely to approach tutors or other relevant staff members directly with any issues as they found them very approachable. Students

were also unclear about the outcomes of the SSL meetings and what happened next, though they were aware that the minutes from the meetings are available on the VLE.

It is compulsory for BPTC students at BPP to do at least five hours of pro bono work. Some students felt that the pro bono provision was good while others felt that they do not get as much out of it as they would like, and do the work only because they have to. Several students said that the marketing materials for the course suggested the centre has excellent connections with Chambers but they were disappointed with the actual provision. Many students felt that careers opportunities at BPP was not as good as they expected, to the extent that some students were organising networking events themselves. The panel **recommends** that staff reflect on whether there is an appropriate balance between the expectations raised by marketing for the course and the provisions available to students on the course (**Recommendation 4**). The management team pointed out that pupillage and other careers events had been organised but that the take up for these events was very low.

Several students also felt that the support to find pupillage could be disappointing. Some students who already had pupillage when they joined the course were surprised that they had not been asked by staff to give feedback on their experiences to help other students. However, some students said that there was support available, but that students had to be proactive in seeking it out themselves. They said that personal tutors can offer advice and that a former Senior Clerk gives good advice on CVs and pupillage applications, which several students found very useful. Some students said they had been put into contact with a specialist in their chosen field by tutors which they appreciated.

Students who do not obtain pupillage within 6 months after successfully completing the course are eligible for BPP's Career Guarantee scheme, enabling them to take a range of other courses, including the LPC and any Law or Business School Masters programme, for free. As this is a new initiative it is unclear what the take up will be. There is an alternative careers fair later on in the academic year which covers alternative career options as well as interim options such as paralegal or legal research roles, which might strengthen applications for pupillage; however, teaching and careers staff said that most students doing the BPTC aim purely for pupillage and a life at the Bar, and that they are hesitant to dilute that aim with other considerations at an early stage. Given the huge competition for pupillage and relatively low number of available places, the panel **recommends** that staff ensure they are supporting students to recognise the transferability of their skills (**Recommendation 5**).

Several students reported experiencing issues with the central BPP Finance department, including repeated requests for fees already paid; scholarship fees not being credited to students' accounts; and students not receiving invoices or receipts for payment. Students also said that they often had difficulty getting in touch with the finance team. These issues had been raised at last year's annual monitoring visit, and management subsequently arranged for the Finance team to meet the panel visiting BPP Manchester, as this is where the team is based.

9. Learning resources (Library and IT)

Some of the students whom the panel met have experienced some minor issues with IT. Some students had had their email passwords changed and were only informed of this change via email, which they couldn't access due to the password change. Others found that email subscriptions from the VLE informing them of new content did not work. However, they are generally happy with the facilities at BPP and they like having a common room where they could meet their colleagues and

feel closer as a group. BSB officers visiting the various BPP sites experienced seamless connection across sites from an initial log-in that was provided on the first visit.

10. Equality and diversity

BPP has a general Equality & Diversity policy as well as specific policies for disability disclosure, learning support, reasonable adjustments in examinations, mental health and responding to disclosure of mental health. The panel observed no issues of concern relating to equality and diversity.

Additional comments

n/a

Good practice, distinguishing features

The panel wishes to commend:

1. Positive feedback from students on tutors;
2. The openness and transparency of approach to monitoring processes; and
3. The keenness to engage with the future bar training programme.

Conclusions: recommendation on accreditation/approval/continuing approval

Continuing approval with recommendations.

Recommendations

The following recommendations must be addressed:

Recommendation 1	Ensure that the action plan takes consideration of developments for the benefit of the following year's cohort and is more explicit about priorities and practical steps to be taken
Recommendation 2	Be explicit about steps they will take to address issues relating to pass rates of the Professional Ethics examinations.
Recommendation 3	Be mindful of the need to enable students to approach centrally assessed subjects with confidence.
Recommendation 4	Reflect on whether there is an appropriate balance between the expectations raised by marketing for the course and the provisions available to students on the course.
Recommendation 5	Ensure that staff support students to recognise the transferability of their skills.

Response by the Provider (maximum one page)

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

We are delighted to know that our students described the teaching in 'glowing terms'; they are the focus of everything we do here and we are committed to maintaining and improving this in the future.

Going forward, we will ensure that our action plan is more explicit in the Annual Reflective Review.

We are reflecting on how we teach Ethics as a national team and will consider ways in which we can provide even more support to students studying this module.

We will encourage our tutors to be more positive about the centrally set assessments in order to instil confidence in our students. We are supportive of the BSB's recent changes to the assessment format which we hope will address many of our concerns when implemented next year.

We will look carefully at our marketing in relation to careers and networking opportunities to ensure that it is realistic.