

**BAR
STANDARDS
BOARD**

REGULATING BARRISTERS

**Bar Professional Training Course
BPP Manchester
Report of Visit held on 25 February 2016**

Name of Institution	Date of Visit
BPP Manchester	25 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 48 (47 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
Prof. Maria Tighe	Professor Emerita and Consultant
Prof. Robin Field-Smith	Lay member, BSB Professional Conduct Committee
Mr Ian Fox	Course Leader (BPTC), Nottingham Trent University

Provider Team attending the event	Role and area of primary responsibility
Anna Banfield	Director of Programmes (Joint)
Mark Keith	Programme Leader
Kelly- Anne Mallon	Head of Careers
Tricia Chatterton	Senior Academic
Alison McGinnis	Student Service Representative (Finance)
Tracie Couper	Student Finance Team Manager
Laura England	Tutor: Advocacy, Professional Ethics, Redoc
Peter Wolfenden	Tutor: Advocacy and Written Skills
Sara Woodhouse-Davie	Tutor: Advocacy, Criminal Litigation and Conferencing

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 BPTC spaces, and had the opportunity to meet, separately, with management, the course team and students. Members of the panel also observed classes in Professional Ethics and Criminal Litigation. The report reflects the findings of the panel and is informed by both the 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 status 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 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

The panel invited staff to talk about how they were maintaining standards on the course and what they were doing to stretch performance further. The teaching team explained the introduction of the "day in the life of a pupil", experience, which had been piloted last year. This had involved tutors clerking students and giving them briefs including realistic challenges that might occur in practice. This was seen as an opportunity to bring the course to life and was intended to join up the skills learned in the classroom with practical experience. Staff received very positive feedback about this initiative, which they intend to repeat for the current cohort at the end of this year as it was an opportunity to simulate things that could not easily be covered in teaching.

2. Quality management systems

All teaching staff had seen the Annual Reflective Review and had been invited to comment or contribute. The Directors of Programmes complete the relevant sections of the document for the Manchester site based on frequent team meetings throughout the year where staff are able to give their opinions. There is also a review meeting at the end of the year where staff can talk about what went well or and what needs to be worked on.

The students whom the panel met reported that the student staff liaison process works well. Students are invited to submit any issues to the Programme Leader beforehand so that he can invite any relevant member of staff to the meeting. Students believe that issues are addressed as a result of the meetings. Students also feel comfortable approaching staff directly if they have any problems. Students attend at least three meetings with their personal tutor: an initial meeting at the start of the first term to check students are settling in, a meeting at the beginning of the second term focusing on preparation for examinations, and a final meeting at the end of the third term.

The panel was satisfied that the recommendations in last year's report had been addressed.

3. Staffing and staff development

The teaching team was very positive about the collegiate atmosphere amongst staff at BPP Manchester. They have regular team meetings where they can discuss issues and share experiences, and they are also situated very close to each other in the staff room so they can talk throughout the week. The tutors whom the panel met described the support they receive from senior members of staff as exceptional. Newer members of staff receive a full induction to teaching and to BPP as an organisation, which includes internal training, observing teaching, and ATC training for those who teach Advocacy. In addition, all new permanent members of staff must work towards a Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Education. Tutors feel supported both by the team on site and by their colleagues across the other BPP centres.

Tutors also stated that they feel supported in their roles as personal tutors and that if they encounter students who require support outside of what they as a personal tutor can offer, there are structures to assist them in the wider organisation.

Tutors have to take five "return to practice days" throughout the year, though they can ask to do more. All of the tutors whom the panel met remain members of chambers, including a part-time tutor who is in practice three days a week.

4. Curriculum content and structure

Students are able to choose from 11 Options subjects. Of the choices offered to students, only one was unable to run due to only two students applying; these students were offered the opportunity to travel to the Leeds site to do the module if they wished.

The placing of Opinion Writing/Drafting later in the year was due to the fact that some students took longer to develop these skills so it was not thought to be wise to assess them too early in the year.

5. Admissions and student profile

The management team explained that all applications to the BPTC are decided on merit; applications are welcome from any background or university provided that the student has done well academically and demonstrates commitment to a career at the Bar. Scholarships are mainly available based on merit but there is an award based on hardship which can be awarded to any student across all of BPP's sites. BPP gives £150,000 a year in scholarships and awards across its sites.

The teaching team said that they do not change their approach to teaching for international students; they stated that there are some inevitable cultural differences with some international students but tutors think that it is good for the international students to learn alongside domestic students. The panel heard that most international students intend to return to their home jurisdictions to practise, though some wish to do mini-pupillages for experience and pupillage preparation support is available to all students.

6. Teaching and Learning (knowledge and skills areas)

The panel was able to observe classes in Professional Ethics and Criminal Litigation. The teaching was overall felt to be of a high standard, with students engaged with and well-prepared for the session. Tutors made references to learning outcomes throughout the session so students were aware of the aims of the session.

Tutors reported that they have some flexibility in how they use teaching materials in class, in response to different groups of students and the feedback received in class audit forms.

The teaching team pointed out that meeting a new cohort of students every year and supporting them through their assessments, particularly the centrally assessed examinations, is a challenge in itself. Tutors also emphasised the fact that as a small team, everyone is able to be involved in any developments at the centre and for the course generally which keeps the entire team looking forward.

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

Assessments are marked by teaching staff, with papers distributed to staff nationally in proportion with any fractional contract. Written papers are anonymised so tutors are only aware of a reference number when marking. Practical performances are marked by on-site tutors but tutors on other sites may do second or third marking.

The management team stated that there is no discernible difference between international and domestic students when it comes to performance on the centrally assessed examinations.

8. Student support and quality of student experience

The panel was pleased to meet with a group of students currently studying the BPTC. Reasons students gave for choosing to do the course at BPP Manchester included wanting to practise on the Northern circuit, the smaller group and cohort sizes relative to some providers, the lower cost of living compared to London, and finding staff at the centre very approachable prior to making an application. Some students commented on a perception that anyone wishing to practise outside London needed to show a commitment to the regional area where they wished to work, as it was thought that Chambers might fear that pupils who did not have a genuine commitment to the region would return to London after a short period. For this reason, students thought regional providers were a good thing. Many of the students said that BPP's Career Guarantee scheme was also a major factor in choosing to study with BPP. Some international students had been recommended the centre by friends who had done the course.

Students are obliged to do five hours of pro bono work whilst studying on the course, and they must write a reflective report on completion of the work. The students whom the panel met praised the number and range of pro bono opportunities but many stated that they felt that they would not get much value out of just five hours of pro bono work; they also noted that some of them had impressive pro bono backgrounds before starting the course. However, most of the students said that they would still do pro bono work even if it was not compulsory. Students said that they were not sure how to write the report based on their experiences nor how it would be assessed; they were generally unsure of the value of reflection for their future practice and did not consider that the report was a priority. The panel **recommends** that staff ensure that students are aware of the high level learning outcomes for pro bono work and that they understand the value of being a reflective practitioner (**Recommendation 1**).

BPP offers an optional Practice Ready certificate which will be available to students to follow online alongside their Options subjects in the third term. The intention for this is to consolidate students' knowledge and skills and bridge the gap between the BPTC and pupillage, covering topics such as how chambers operate, commercial awareness and advanced legal research skills. Students will then have a choice of a skills module at the end, for example in vulnerable witness advocacy or mediation (for which students receive an external certificate, and which they have to pay for separately, though it is subsidised). The mediation course takes place after the course is finished.

The students whom the panel met were not aware of the full extent of what working towards the certificate would involve but they said that after their examinations when their workload decreases they might be more inclined to seek out more information. The management team conceded that the launch of the certificate this year has been somewhat piecemeal as some of the materials were already available through the VLE and the remainder would be available from the third term.

The students whom the panel met were positive about the provision of support for obtaining pupillage. Students had a series of talks in the first term on preparing for pupillage and they found it was helpful to focus not just on the application stage but also on what pupillage is actually like; these talks were given by solicitors, clerks, judges and pupil supervisors which students found very interesting. Some students have approached staff to go through their applications and they are able to do mock interviews with tutors. Students can also book sessions with a former senior clerk. Students have access to pupillage support for 12 months after finishing the course.

All of the students whom the panel met said they would approach BPTC tutors for careers support of advice in the first instance; they described the careers service available to them as somewhat generic as it is not focused on information relevant to BPTC students. The management team explained that there are regular meetings between the careers team and programme leaders and they do work closely with each other. The panel **recommends** that the management team encourage more cross-fertilization between the teaching team and careers support staff (**Recommendation 2**) to make use of the valuable specialist expertise tutors hold.

Students reported that staff are very supportive and approachable. The panel heard that students requiring special adjustments had found this process reasonably smooth so far, though there had been an issue with students being logged out of a computer midway through an examination. The teaching team emphasised that this issue would be addressed in time for the next examinations. Students are encouraged before the course starts to contact staff if they require any learning support. A learning support agreement is then drafted.

Some students whom the panel met had experienced some minor issues with finance administration at the beginning or prior to the start of the course; however, all the students said that staff in the finance team were helpful when they spoke to them directly. The panel was pleased to meet with BPP's finance team which is based in Manchester and invited the team to talk through a number of concerns which had been raised by students across all BPP sites. The finance team explained the process students go through to pay their fees; a plan is put in place for each student and they are sent reminders via email or text message when payments are due. The panel was able to view templates for all standard correspondence sent by the finance team and was satisfied that the tone and style of this correspondence was appropriate. The finance team stated that they use two different systems which means that occasionally payments recorded on one system can take some time to appear on the other system which means reminders may be sent when payment has already been received.

Some students reported that they had found it difficult to get in touch with the central administrative team to organise deferrals, transfers and accepting offers.

9. Learning resources (Library and IT)

The panel invited students to talk about the provision of online resources for the course. While students said that there are a lot of resources available on the virtual learning environment (VLE), several of the students stated that they didn't always find the resources useful as they don't believe that the online resources always add value to what they have learned in class. Students are also unsure which materials to seek out. Many students felt that there is nothing on the VLE that they don't already have in a hard copy format. The panel **recommends** that staff reflect on whether the VLE is functioning as effectively as a communication tool as is intended (**Recommendation 3**).

The students whom the panel met did not raise any concerns regarding any other learning resources.

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. All sites are wheelchair accessible. The panel did not note any issues relating to equality and diversity during the visit.

Additional comments

n/a

Good practice, distinguishing features

The panel wished to commend:

- The "day in the life of a pupil" experience;
- The enthusiasm, knowledge and commitment of the teaching team;

- The maturing and cohesive team, and
- Evident continued improvement building on the strong performance last year.

Conclusions: recommendation on accreditation/approval/continuing approval

Continuing approval with recommendations.

Recommendations

The following recommendations must be addressed:

Recommendation 1	Ensure that students are aware of the high level learning outcomes for pro bono work and that they understand the value of being a reflective practitioner.
Recommendation 2	Encourage more cross-fertilization between the teaching team and careers support staff.
Recommendation 3	Reflect on whether the VLE is functioning as effectively as a communication tool as is intended.

Response by the Provider (maximum one page)

We are grateful to the panel for their careful review and recognition of good practice, in particular, our innovative Day in a Life experience (which is to be expanded in scope and depth this year), the fact that our students find the teaching team approachable and supportive in assisting their studies and in their search for pupillage, that the tutors work in an collegiate team environment and that we have continued to build on our strong performance last year.

In respect of each recommendation:

Recommendation 1

We intend, as part of, induction week, to timetable a session specifically with pro-bono which will introduce the students to the pro-bono projects and will also give us an opportunity to explain what is expect of the students in their pro-bono report.

Also in the introductory personal tutor session we will emphasis the importance of being a reflective practitioner on the BPTC, in pupillage and beyond.

Recommendation 2

In June the BPTC teaching team and the Manchester Careers' Service are holding a joint training session in order that both teams can benefit from the others expertise and to plan the BPTC careers events for the forthcoming academic year with the aim of building on the successful events we have held this year.

As part of induction week we intend to timetable a session with the Careers' Service to full introduce the careers' team and to introduce the students to the assistance the Careers' Service can offer BPTC students.

Recommendation 3

We will reintroduce an introduction to the VLE as part of induction week in order that the students become fully familiar with its purpose and content at the very start of the course.