

**BAR
STANDARDS
BOARD**

REGULATING BARRISTERS

**Bar Professional Training Course
BPP Law School, London
Report of Visit held on 8 February 2017**

Name of Institution	Date of Visit
BPP Law School, London BPP University	8 February 2017

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 (272 enrolled) Part-time: 96 (73 enrolled)	September 2016 to July 2017

Panel Members	Role and area of primary responsibility
Dr Victoria Stec	Head of Training Supervision and Examinations, BSB (Chair)
Ms Hayley Langan	Senior Training Supervision Officer, BSB
Prof Maria Tighe	Legal academic
Ms Emma Piasecki	Director of Learning and Teaching: Postgraduate Professional 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 Charlotte Wanendeya	Lecturer, FT Programme Leader
Mr Peter Crisp	Dean and CEO, BPP Law School
Mr Christopher Kessling	Programme Leader for Part Time Course
Ms Sabeen Obaidullah	Lecturer
Mr Stephen Wells	Lecturer
Mr Andrew Maryniak	Lecturer
Ms Hanne Stevens	Lecturer, Learning Support Officer
Amanda Moylan-Jones	Lecturer
Anthony Kennedy	Lecturer

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 2015-16, copies of External Examiner reports for the relevant year, the most recent BSB visit report and other relevant information. A specific area of discussion during this visit was BPP's recent application to the BSB to increase the number of validated places across their four existing sites, in reaction to the over-recruitment of students at BPP London, Manchester and Birmingham. The panel was also provided with BPP's application for the increased numbers.

During the visit the panel met, separately, with management, course team and students. The report reflects the findings of the panel and is informed by both documentation and visit.

The visit was made in the context of over-recruitment by BPP at three of its sites, by a global total of 13. In London, eight students above maximum validated numbers had been recruited. The BSB's visits to all BPP sites therefore specifically considered any potential adverse impact on students of the over-recruitment.

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 currently run on four sites, in London, Leeds, Birmingham and Manchester; in January 2017 the BSB gave approval, subject to conditions, for the BPTC to also be delivered at BPP Bristol from September 2017. 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 invited the management team to account for the over-recruitment which occurred in this academic year (2016-17), which has led to the London site having eight students more than the number of validated places (264). The team suggested that some of BPP's unique selling points such as the Career Guarantee scheme and their scholarship packages could be a reason for the increase in the number of students applying for and accepting offers at BPP despite the overall number of BPTC applicants decreasing. The panel heard that BPP is requesting to increase the number of validated places at their sites because they wish to have extra capacity but also so that there is a buffer; they do not expect to recruit up to the new, higher number of places they have requested (300 at the London site) but to a target of 288, or 18 groups of 16 students. This would allow for some fluctuation in the number of students who accept places each year; the panel heard that the same number of offers was made for the academic year 2015-16 as for 2016-17 but it resulted in a much higher number of acceptances in 2016-17. The panel heard that some efforts have been made to adjust the formula for calculating the likely conversion of offers to acceptances each year but it is difficult to gauge what will happen.

BPP made an application to the BSB to increase the number of validated full-time places across all their sites in order to avoid over-recruiting students in future years. The panels on visits to all BPP

sites considered the impact an increase in student numbers would have on accommodation, resources, staff workload and students' learning experience at each site. Having visited all sites, the panels considered that there would be no significant negative impact of an increase in numbers and therefore approved BPP's application. The new validated number of places in London from September 2017 is 300, with a target recruitment number of 288.

2. Quality management systems

BPP has a well-established system of quality management that is shared across all sites which deliver the BPTC. National module teams meet weekly via conference call to discuss any issues. Student Staff Liaison Meetings take place once per term to give students an opportunity to raise any issues with staff.

3. Staffing and staff development

The panel asked what impact the increase in student numbers has had on resources, and what potential implications there would be should the number of validated places increase. The management team explain that the BSB's recent relaxation in prescription of class sizes from a maximum of 12 to a maximum of 18 has meant that there has been limited impact for the knowledge subjects which would be taught in classes of 16, though more staff will be needed to teach skills subjects such as Advocacy which will continue to be taught in classes of four. The team explained that in London there is a core team of full-time teaching staff which is topped up by freelance staff which allows BPP to make adjustments based on fluctuating numbers without the need to keep adjusting the size of the core team. . The panel learned that only the core staff members in the London site would be personal tutors, for 12-24 students each. A new full-time member of staff would need to be recruited to meet this need.

The teaching team said that they had not experienced any significant impact as a result of the increased number of students this academic year and they did not envisage that increasing the number of places would have a major impact either. They said there is enough material to ensure that there are sufficient questions to involve the whole class and that it could even be useful for students to hear from a wider group of their colleagues in a class of 16 as it allows more room for varied debate.

4. Curriculum content and structure

BPP has made some changes to the structure of their advocacy module; previously examination-in-chief and cross-examination were taught together through term 2. Now Examination will be taught and assessed early in term 2. Cross examination will then be taught and assessed later in term 2.. The teaching team explained that this has proved helpful to weaker students who may otherwise have struggled as it allows them to fully understand the concept of examination-in-chief before moving on to cross-examination. The panel heard that students do not do a full mock trial or conduct an examination-in-chief and linked cross-examination in subsequent weeks but the same case is used throughout the advocacy module so that they can follow the case theory.

The students whom the panel met said that they were worried about the Professional Ethics assessment; students get 6 small group sessions with a large gap in the middle, and the students felt that this was not enough and that they were forgetting what they had learned in the gap between direct teaching sessions. The students conceded that there were podcasts available which would help with the continuation of their learning but few of the students whom the panel met had used

these as they felt there was not enough time to do so, and that more taught sessions would be useful or at least a smaller gap between the existing ones. The students also feel that it would be more useful to have their mock assessments in Professional Ethics marked by their tutors rather than self-marked as they felt there was limited opportunity for them to pick up on where they might be going wrong. The panel **recommends** that BPP considers the number and spread of direct teaching sessions for Professional Ethics, and considers how best to provide the students with constructive feedback in respect of their performance in formative assessments (**Recommendation 1**).

5. Admissions and student profile

The panel asked whether the increase in student numbers might be a result of recruiting weaker students who may have a harder time successfully completing the course. However, the management team said that this year they had not recruited students from clearing and that the calibre of students remained very high; in fact, they felt they were being more selective with offering places. They emphasised that the proposed increase in places was not a move to reduce standards and increase volume and that students should expect the same learning experience if the cohort size increases.

6. Teaching and Learning (knowledge and skills areas)

The panel noted that in the Annual Reflective Review there was a strong focus on the need to recruit better students but it was keen to understand how BPP staff support students who may be weaker academically to improve and achieve well on the course. The management team said that they were improving course materials to allow students to consolidate their learning more. There has been collaboration with BPP's School of Psychology to underpin the teaching of Advocacy.

Information is given to students at the beginning of the year to tell them what to do and where to go if things go wrong, and this is kept on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The panel heard that they try to filter out potential issues at the admissions stage by trying to only recruit those who have a good chance of succeeding on the course, but there are mechanisms for those who require support. Students' performance is monitored through the personal tutor relationship; the personal tutor can pick up on issues a student may be having and students can approach their tutor for support. Issues can also be escalated to the Programme Leader and beyond if necessary. Both pastoral and academic issues can be addressed this way. Tutors are available from 9-5 to meet the needs of students and they try to accommodate requests for extra time and support where they can.

The team explained that teaching and the associated materials are available in a number of formats to address the different learning styles students may have; there are manuals and podcasts which cover the same or similar content but reach different types of learner. The panel heard that when a student is found to be struggling tutors will ask the student how they are learning and try to see if there are any alternative approaches which might be more suitable. Tutors also take on feedback from the cohort as a whole; for example, it was identified that students were struggling with the short answer questions in Professional Ethics so a session has been introduced which specifically covers the technique required to answer these type of questions. The changes to the Crime Syllabus has also allowed tutors to cover the entirety of the syllabus in taught sessions which benefits those students who learn better through taught sessions rather than self-teaching.

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

The teaching team discussed the difficulty of marking skills subjects because of the level of subjectivity involved, though there are internal mechanisms and oversight which help to address this. The panel learned that while sample scripts are distributed for written subjects, such as Opinion

Writing, which helps to standardise the marking process, this does not happen in the oral skills subjects such as Advocacy. Marking meetings do take place before and after the marking process in skills subjects but the teaching team said that it could be useful to distribute sample performances in a similar manner to sample scripts in the written subjects. The panel **recommends** that BPP reviews the current system of marking and moderation of oral skill subjects with a view to adopting an approach consistent with that used in written skills (**Recommendation 2**).

The students whom the panel met said that they would like more mock exams for the centrally assessed subjects as the BSB only provides one. The students were particularly anxious as the format of the exams has changed for 2016-17. Students were also unhappy about the timing of some of the formative assessments; the panel learned that three assessments had been due in the same week as the Pupillage Gateway closed, and that reading week was the week after this. Some students had felt unable to balance interviews, pupillage gateway applications, normal preparation for class and the formative assessments so several students simply had not done one or more of the formative assessments as they were not compulsory. The panel recommends that BPP reviews the scheduling of formative assessments to avoid bunching and conflicts with other student obligations, for example the Pupillage Gateway (**Recommendation 3**). The BSB noted that it would also ensure that the Bar Council was provided with the dates of centralised examinations as soon as these became available, so that these could be taken into account in the scheduling of the Pupillage Gateway.

The students were particularly impressed with the way the materials for the course link different modules through a common brief.

8. Student support and quality of student experience

The panel heard that around 40 students have so far taken up BPP's Career Guarantee scheme, which offers BPTC graduates who have not obtained pupillage within six months of completing the course the chance to study one of BPP's other programmes, such as the Legal Practice Course. Only a small number of students have so far been eligible for the scheme and BPP hopes to develop a mechanism for tracking subsequent success.

The panel heard about some of the pro bono and other extra-curricular activities on offer for students. BPP students must undertake a minimum of five hours of pro bono work as part of the Professional Ethics obligation. Opportunities are advertised on the VLE and there is a Pro Bono unit which aims to help students find pro bono work but students must be proactive in seeking out opportunities. It is likely that more opportunities will have to be developed should the number of students increase. Only a small number of students had yet to contact the Pro Bono Unit at the time of the visit and these students would be followed up. The teaching team said that though students often say that they find the idea of pro bono overwhelming at the beginning of the year due to their high workload from the rest of the course, they generally find it very valuable once they have done the work.

In addition to the Staff Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) meetings, students were asked for their feedback via a survey at the end of the first term. The students whom the panel met said that SSLC meetings are a useful way of raising issues, though they feel comfortable in approaching their tutors for more minor ad hoc issues. All the students said that they find all their tutors supportive and approachable. They said that issues are dealt with promptly.

Students praised the supportive environment and said that the transition from their undergraduate experience to the BPTC had been easier because of the supportiveness of staff and their colleagues. There had been a learning process in adapting to different and learning styles but they feel they managed this well. The students appreciated a revision session that was given at the beginning of the year in remedies which filled in some gaps in knowledge from their undergraduate experience. Students were also very happy with the documentation and teaching materials for the course. However, they said that they found the induction process very fast and overwhelming. Several of the students whom the panel met had found it difficult to obtain some basic information about the course

prior to registration, including term dates. There was a perceived lack of consistency between students in what information they received via email prior to starting the course. The panel **recommends** that BPP reviews the information provided to students prior to joining the course and review the length and content of induction (**Recommendation 4**).

The students also said that they found some of the basic information around the BPTC more generally to be somewhat confusing – for example, it was not immediately clear what role the Inns of Court play in the student's journey to becoming a barrister or what the relationship is between the Inns, the BSB and the BPTC providers. Students felt it would be useful for a brief summary of this sort of information to be provided for prospective students so they know whom to contact about what and when.

9. Learning resources (Library and IT)

The panel asked whether there would be any impact on resources such as IT and the library should the number of students increase. The management team explained that the library is already quite large and as the increase in numbers would be proportionately small compared to the number of students who currently use the library, the impact on these resources would be limited. However, more licences for online resources and more hard copies of books would be purchased should the numbers be increased to ensure that students had sufficient access to relevant texts. The panel did not hear of any existing issues with IT or library provision.

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

We note the suggestion from students that it would be helpful for the BSB to devise information for prospective BPTC students on the role of, and relationships between, the BSB, the Bar Council, the Inns and the Providers.

Good practice, distinguishing features

The panel wishes to commend:

1. Students' positive feedback on the quality of teaching materials and the dedication and approachability of tutors.

Conclusions: recommendation on accreditation/approval/continuing approval

Continuing approval with recommendations.

Recommendations

The following recommendations must be addressed:

Recommendation 1	Consider the number and spread of direct teaching sessions for Professional Ethics, and considers how best to provide the students with constructive feedback in respect of their performance in formative assessments.
Recommendation 2	Review the current system of marking and moderation in Advocacy and Conferencing with a view to adopting an approach consistent with that used in written skills.
Recommendation 3	Review scheduling of formative assessments to avoid bunching and conflicts with other student obligations, for example the Pupillage Gateway.
Recommendation 4	Review the information provided to students prior to joining the course and review the length and content of induction.

Response by the Provider (maximum one page)

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

We have conducted a review into the number and spread of direct teaching sessions for Professional Ethics. We introduced an additional SGS for 2016-17. For 2017-18 we have spread out the SGSs more evenly and we intend to introduce some new interactive webinars and lectures. We will keep the manner in which we provide feedback in respect of the PE formative assessment under review. We note that for the first sit of PE year we appear to have had better pass rates than some other providers.

We are looking at ways to improve the current system of marking and moderation in Advocacy and Conferencing with a view to adopting an approach consistent with that used in written skills.

We have changed the dates of formative assessments for 2017-18 to avoid bunching and conflict with the Pupillage Gateway.

We have reviewed the information provided to students prior to joining the course and the length and content of induction. We note that students in our regional centres were happy with a 2 day induction programme.