

**BAR
STANDARDS
BOARD**

REGULATING BARRISTERS

**Bar Professional Training Course
Cardiff Law School, Cardiff University
Report of Visit held on 15 March 2017**

Name of Institution	Date of Visit
Cardiff Law School, Cardiff University	15 March 2017

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

Numbers/modes approved	Dates of course
Approved for: 84 full-time (61 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
Mr Oliver Hanmer	Director of Regulatory Assurance, BSB
Mr Deveral Capps	Dean of Leeds Law School
Mr David Rees	Solicitor, Legal Academic

Provider Team attending the event	Role and area of primary responsibility
Ms Jetsun Lebaschi	BPTC Course Leader, Tutor
Ms Jayne Woodward	Senior Lecturer
Prof Angela Devereux	Head of the Centre for Professional Legal Studies
Ms Michaela Thomas	BPTC Deputy Course Leader, Tutor
Mr Michael Edwards	Tutor
Mr Christopher Humphries	Tutor
Mr Dominic DeSaulles	Tutor
Ms Nicola Harris	Tutor
Ms Kathryn Clague	Tutor
Mr William Seagrim	Tutor

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.

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.

Context: The Provider

Cardiff University delivered the Bar Vocational Course (BVC) from 1997 to 2010, and since 2010 has delivered the Bar Professional Training Course (BPTC) through the Centre for Professional Legal Studies (CPLS) which is part of Cardiff Law School within the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Cardiff University is the only member of the Russell Group to offer the BPTC, and the only provider in Wales.

1. Adherence to course aims, philosophy and standards

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

2. Quality management systems

There is a Student Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC) where students can raise any issues they are experiencing on the course. Students can also approach staff directly if they have more informal or ad hoc issues and these are passed on to the Course Leader. If students have more formal complaints there is a procedure outlined in the handbook given to them at the start of the year.

3. Staffing and staff development

All staff in the Centre for Professional Legal Studies (CPLS) are on teaching and scholarship contracts so they are not obliged to do research as part of their role. However, many members of the teaching team do get involved with research, such as looking into how technology is used in teaching or doing research projects with the Solicitors' Regulation Authority (SRA). While those on teaching and scholarship contracts work differently to those teaching academic law, BPTC staff do work with their academic colleagues as well as those in other departments who teach vocationally to get a broad range of experience.

Teaching staff are able to choose what type of development they would like to do. Many members of staff retain links to practice through former colleagues and through court observation, including cases outside their normal area of practice. Two tutors are feed-paid tribunal judges and another tutor sat with a district judge over the summer while not teaching.

Tutors this year have been paired with someone in a different discipline – in academic law or politics, for example – so that they can be exposed to different styles of teaching and share good practice. New tutors can go on an academic practice course where they can meet with tutors across the whole university which tutors have found helpful. Cardiff University is very supportive of staff applying for the fellowship of Higher Education Academy.

4. Curriculum content and structure

The students whom the panel met said that they had found the induction period at the beginning of the course overwhelming as there were a lot of large group sessions and a lot of information to take in. Teaching sessions start straightaway and students said they didn't get materials for some subjects until the morning before the first session. Some students felt it would have been beneficial for them to have been able to see course materials in advance, but other students felt that the steep learning curve at the beginning of the year helped prepare them for the time management that is required of them for the rest of the course.

However, they were positive about the mandatory session with a vocal coach from the Royal Shakespeare Company which they found to be a very good ice breaker. Students liked being put outside of their comfort zone with their colleagues early on. They also found that while the induction period was intense, it was on the whole well-organised.

Students were also very positive about the organisation and structure of the course generally. They liked that examination-in-chief and cross-examination are taught concurrently in Advocacy and that Drafting happens after Opinion Writing; student said that they felt this helped with their learning progression. Students also appreciated having some exams before the Christmas break.

5. Admissions and student profile

The panel heard that the demographic profile of this year's cohort of students is broadly the same as in previous years. Around 20% of the cohort are domestic students, most of whom are Cardiff-based. Performance of international and domestic students is roughly comparable. The teaching team said that the diversity of the cohort is good for training for the Bar and that cross-pollination of backgrounds and experiences is very valuable for all students.

The international cohort is predominantly Malaysian but there has been an increase in the number of students from Bangladesh this year. The school has strong links with Malaysia, and the local Bar in South Wales has shown interest in forging a relationship with the Malaysian Bar.

Only first choice applications for the course are considered unless there is an insufficient number of first choice applications, but this has not recently been the case. There is a scoring system for applications; last year, the threshold score that results in an offer was increased.

Three students were asked to leave the course in September 2017 due to issues with English Language ability. Students are warned of the risk they take when self-declaring their English language ability. The course team had put in place a change in their application process which meant that applicants who had not demonstrated an acceptable standard of English were given a conditional offer based on passing IELTS, but the College had concerns about this so the process was stopped. The team have since made some changes to the scoring process relating to communication and degree results; it is hoped that these modifications will help to avoid the difficulty of asking people to leave. The panel **recommends** that the team reviews the impact of the modifications to the scoring system for admissions (**Recommendation 1**).

The panel asked whether the team had considered doing interviews with candidates to assess English language proficiency. The management team explained that they were keen to have a process in place that would be transparent and feasible to do with a small team; interviews, especially via Skype, tend to be focused on conversational English rather than written ability. The panel nevertheless **recommends** that the team introduces some form of interview process to assess candidates' English language ability prior to entry on the course (**Recommendation 2**).

6. Teaching and Learning (knowledge and skills areas)

The students whom the panel met said that the course has helped them toward becoming more self-reflective; they are encouraged to revisit recorded skills performances and reflect on any feedback they are given from colleagues and tutors. Students said that they have seen each other improve as the course has progressed and they have appreciated giving and being given feedback from their colleagues; they find peer review very valuable. Students also get feedback from tutors for written skills – students self-mark their own work and then the tutor marks it. Students said that this has allowed them to understand their mistakes better. Some students said they would like to get an actual grade for practice work, but others conceded that they are given grades in formative assessments so they know where they stand, and that tutors don't give grades for all work because students should be focusing on improving their performance overall, not just getting a specific grade.

Students said that their colleagues are generally well-prepared for sessions; they are conscious of not letting their colleagues down which encourages them to prepare. They said that attendance is good on the whole, though there was a drop in attendance around exam time. Students are usually able to attend alternative sessions if they have to miss a class.

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

Students said that they think closed-book examinations, particularly for Professional Ethics, are not a good representation of practice, as practising barristers would have access to the Code of Conduct and the Ethics hotline. They also said that they were concerned that the mark scheme for the Professional Ethics assessment would be too prescriptive and would not allow for variations on interpretations of an issue as might happen in real life. Several students said that they thought a viva-style examination would be more appropriate for assessing Professional Ethics.

8. Student support and quality of student experience

The students whom the panel met gave a variety of reasons for choosing to study the BPTC at Cardiff University. Some had done their undergraduate degree at Cardiff and wanted to stay in the same city. Others lived in Cardiff or nearby and wanted to remain close to home. The lower cost of the course compared to London was a determining factor for many, as was the lower cost of living. Some students liked the fact that they would be in a fairly small cohort. Others had been impressed with the reputation of the teaching at Cardiff, and the guarantee of a two-week placement.

Students reported that they work well as a cohort and that they tend to support each other. There is a lot of discussion, especially in skills sessions, and students feel like they learn from each other. Students also feel comfortable approaching their tutors for support with personal and academic issues. If students have concerns about the course they can also raise issues with the Course Leader directly or at the student staff liaison committee (SSLC). Students describe the committee as being very receptive; minutes are drawn up after each meeting and circulated to all students.

Students tend to organise their own social events and activities, though it can be difficult to organise around the different Inns events as colleagues will tend to be away at different weekends. There is an all-Inns qualifying session held locally but students would like to be able to do more in Cardiff. The students whom the panel met said that they were aware of a range of activities on offer in the wider university but that the BPTC timetable makes participation in things like sports teams very difficult so few do. However, many students are taking up the opportunity to do extra-curricular activities relating to the course. The students said that it can be difficult to balance studying time with other opportunities but it can be done. Several students are involved in pro bono activities; they are encouraged to give feedback on their activities but there is no structured reflection. Students do however feel that they are gaining useful experience in doing these activities.

There is an alternative careers fair once a year, and a careers co-ordinator dedicated to the school who works three days per week and keeps up an active programme of events. Students can book appointments to get help with applications and have their CV looked over, but students whom the panel met felt that more information around pupillage would be useful, including a pupillage fair as there isn't one held locally. The majority of pupillages in South Wales are taken by Cardiff BPTC graduates, but graduates also go on to pupillages elsewhere. There was a panel talk with four Cardiff alumni who are now in practice, two of whom practise locally and two of whom practise in London, and students were invited to ask questions about their experiences. In addition to this, the panel **recommends** that Cardiff considers holding a small-scale pupillage fair (**Recommendation 3**). Of the graduates who do not secure pupillage, the majority will obtain some other form of legal employment.

Many students take up the opportunity to do a two-week placement organised by the school. Those who had chosen to do the placement said that they had found it very useful and that they had made valuable connections with people in practice. Students also find it encouraging to interact with Cardiff alumni who are now junior barristers and to see how things really work in practice, outside the vacuum of the classroom. Students are also encouraged to go to the Court of Appeal and Supreme Court when it sits in Cardiff to get used to different patterns of speech and behaviour than they might experience in class, and to knit together the knowledge they have learned to see how a full trial works from beginning to end.

Cardiff also runs a scheme with South Wales Police where BPTC students cross-examine police officers in order to train them for preparing and giving statements in court. This takes place in an actual courtroom and BPTC tutors sit as judges.

9. Learning resources (Library and IT)

The virtual learning environment used at Cardiff University is Panopto, which allows students to access their recorded skills performances and other course documents using an app on their mobile phones. Neither students nor staff raised any concerns about the learning resources available to them at Cardiff University.

10. Equality and diversity

Cardiff University has a general Equality, Dignity & Diversity policy which is overseen by the Law School's Equality and Diversity Committee. A member of staff from the Centre for Professional Legal Studies sits on this committee. The panel observed no issues of concern relating to equality and diversity.

Additional comments

n/a

Good practice, distinguishing features

The panel wished to commend:

- The overwhelmingly positive feedback of the students on both the structure of the course and the support from staff.
- The highly committed, student-focused teaching team.
- The effective use of independent and peer feedback, which has enabled students to understand the importance of being a self-reflective practitioner.
- The development of relationships with external bodies, i.e. South Wales Police, and local practitioners to the benefit of the students.

Conclusions: recommendation on accreditation/approval/continuing approval

Continuing approval with recommendations.

Recommendations

The following recommendations must be addressed:

Recommendation 1	Review the impact of the modifications to the scoring system for admissions.
Recommendation 2	Introduce some form of interview process to assess candidates' English language ability prior to entry on the course.
Recommendation 3	Consider holding a small-scale pupillage fair.

Response by the Provider (maximum one page)

General

We appreciated the positive and constructive manner in which the visit was conducted and welcomed the opportunity to discuss relevant issues.

Recommendations

We will give careful consideration to the recommendations made.