

**BAR
STANDARDS
BOARD**

REGULATING BARRISTERS

**Bar Professional Training Course
University of Law, Birmingham
Report of visit held on 21 February 2017**

Name of Institution	Date of Visit
University of Law, Birmingham	21 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 132 (26 enrolled 2016-17) Part-time 48 (suspended 2016-17)	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 Gault	Senior Training Supervision Officer, BSB
Professor Andrew Sanders	Professor of Criminal Law and Criminology Head of School of Law, Politics and Sociology, University of Sussex
Ms Samantha Pullin	Barrister

Provider Team attending the event	Role and area of primary responsibility
Mr Lee Handy	BPTC Course Leader - Birmingham
Ms Jacqueline Cheltenham	National Programme and Student Affairs Director, BPTC
Ms Sarah Ramsay	Academic Manager
Ms Rachel Price	Tutor
Ms Laura McQuitty	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 Examiners' reports for the relevant year, the most recent BSB visit report and other relevant information.

During the visit the panel had the opportunity to meet, separately, with management, course team and students. Members of the panel also observed a class in Criminal Advocacy. The report reflects the findings of the panel and is informed by both documentation and visit.

Context: the Provider

The College of Law was established in 1962 as an independent provider of legal education. In 2006 it was the first independent institution to be granted degree awarding powers; in 2012 it was granted University title and became the University of Law. It delivered the Bar Vocational Course (BVC) in London from 1997 to 2009 and was approved to run the new Bar Professional Training Course (BPTC) from 2010. The Birmingham site opened in 2001 and delivered the BVC from 2007 to 2009. The Birmingham site was approved to deliver the BPTC from 2010; the part-time route was approved to run from September 2011. A site in Leeds was accredited in 2015 and began delivery of the course in September 2016.

1. Adherence to course aims, philosophy and standards

The panel heard that from next September, the University of Law will run a BPTC LLM course across all its centres. This means that UK students who register from the outset for the LLM will be eligible for government funding.

The documentation available to the panel prior to the visit included an action plan. However, the panel felt that this action plan lacked strategic focus and concentrated more on operational issues. For example, the newly validated LLM programme was not mentioned. The panel **recommends** that management staff ensure that the BPTC action plan reflects more strategic direction as well as more immediate operational issues (**Recommendation 1**).

2. Quality management systems

The University of Law has a policy on staff peer observation; peer observation occurs in pairs or groups of three and includes pre-meetings and reflection after the observation. Visiting lecturers do not take part in the formal peer observation process but do get observed by management staff.

Students are able to approach their tutors with informal ad-hoc issues but there are student representatives who meet with senior staff to discuss larger concerns. The students whom the panel met said that they felt that their concerns are always listened to even where it is not possible to make changes to address them.

Teaching staff are asked for input into annual reflective review documentation which is sent to the BSB; module teams feed back to their team leader who feeds back centrally. There are also weekly team meetings to discuss how things are going. Visiting lecturers are also able to contribute and offer feedback, for example on course materials. The minutes of the meetings are sent to staff at other centres.

3. Staffing and staff development

The teaching team has strong links to the local Bar and members remain in contact with their former colleagues in practice; some are door tenants in chambers. The panel heard that while the core group of teaching staff is currently sufficient to teach the number of students on the course, there is flexibility to have staff who teach on the LPC or GDL also teach on the BPTC should numbers increase. A number of visiting lecturers from the local Bar are also available; however, the management team emphasised that they want to ensure consistency for students where possible and visiting lecturers will usually teach students for the entirety of a module.

Staff development is discussed in meetings with line managers and is drawn from tutors' needs as well as management observation. Many BPTC tutors across all centres are doing higher degrees in law and/or educational practice, which are funded by the university. Any good practice learned by individual tutors is shared with colleagues locally and across other University of Law centres. Full-time teaching staff sometimes find it difficult to attend development events in-person due to their timetable but they can participate in webinars and other such remote sessions.

4. Curriculum content and structure

Students who are unable to do their first choice of Options subjects due to low uptake are able to go to London. The smallest class size to make an Option subject viable is around five; the smallest Options class this year contains six students. The students whom the panel met said that while many of them had been unable to do one of their choices for Options, the benefits of being in a small cohort outweighed the impact of being unable to do one small element of the course due to low uptake. Some of the students said that Options do not go into sufficient depth for them to have a major impact on their prospects for pupillage; they felt that diversifying their CV in other ways – such as mini-pupillages in specialised areas - was more important.

5. Admissions and student profile

Starting from the recruitment for the academic year 2015/16, all candidates for the BPTC at all University of Law sites were subject to a selection process, which includes an interview and both a written and advocacy-based task. The panel invited the management team to talk about the impact of the selection process, particularly any impact on diversity. The team said that as they have only had

one full cycle of an entire cohort who underwent the selective recruitment process it is difficult to draw too many conclusions. However, it appears that the percentage of students on the course who are white has increased. The management team explained that this might be partly because of the reduced number of international students being admitted to the course, due to insufficient English language ability for success at the interview stage. Roughly the same number of students have been applying for the BPTC at the University of Law overall, with a 14% increase in the number of candidates who are putting the Birmingham site as their first choice. The impact of the selection process would be kept under review as more data became available.

The part-time mode at Birmingham has been suspended since 2015 due to the potential cohort being too small to be viable. The management team said they are optimistic that they will have sufficient interest for the part-time mode for the academic year 2017/18 as they have had several high calibre candidates show interest and some students deferred their place from the previous year. The panel **recommends** that the University of Law gives careful thought to the most appropriate point at which a decision is made regarding the viability of the part-time route, bearing in mind the potential impact on applicants (**Recommendation 2**).

The students whom the panel met said that they liked the fact that they and their colleagues had gone through a selection process to get onto the course; the students felt that they were with people who were of a similar calibre to them and that this was beneficial to them as they could learn from each other. Students also enjoyed the selection process itself; they liked that they were given a chance to show their potential through the oral and written assessments and that tutors were able to get to know students personally through the interview portion. Students felt that the University of Law did as much as they could to accommodate them – some interviews took place via Skype, for example.

6. Teaching and Learning (knowledge and skills areas)

The panel was able to observe a class in Criminal Advocacy. The session that the panel observed was thought to be of a high calibre, with students well-prepared and engaged with the session. The tutor was knowledgeable and engaging, and had a good rapport with students.

Some years ago skills and knowledge subjects were separated from a single combined three-hour session to two discrete 90 minute sessions taught in close proximity. Teaching staff explained that this was done to allow students to focus more on a single skill. However, there is still a lot of overlap between skills and knowledge subjects and tutors emphasised the value for students of being able to apply knowledge through practical skills. Students participate in both a civil and criminal trial with a practitioner acting as a judge; the trial consolidates all of the learning across both knowledge and skills.

The panel heard that while students are encouraged to keep a reflective journal throughout the course there is mixed use of the journal amongst the cohort. Many students keep a more informal log of practical skills feedback for review before future sessions and they find this useful. Some students also re-watch the videos of past performances. Tutors know students well and are able to offer very individual feedback which they compare and contrast with feedback on past performances.

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

The students whom the panel met were anxious about the upcoming centralised assessments as the format was changed for this academic year. However, they said that the feedback they receive from tutors on sample assessments and other exercises is very detailed and in-depth and they find it useful. Sample answers are given out to allow students to see where they can get marks. The panel heard that this year due to the introduction of single best answer (SBA) style questions in the Civil and Criminal Litigation assessments the teaching team have done a lot of exercises geared towards preparing students for this new type of question.

8. Student support and quality of student experience

The students whom the panel met gave very positive feedback about their tutors. They said that they enjoy being in a small cohort which means that they are able to get to know their tutors and vice versa. The students reported that there is a very good support structure in place and that tutors are approachable and easy to talk to; tutors have an open door policy and personal tutors go out of their way to make time to speak to students if they want to talk about something. Students also like that being in a small cohort and thus small classes means that they are encouraged to prepare properly for classes as they know tutors will engage everyone multiple times; they said that in a bigger class there might be opportunities for some students to hide.

The international students whom the panel met said that they had found the staff at the University of Law incredibly helpful in offering support with the many things they had to sort out with regard to relocating to the UK such as finding accommodation. International students were put in touch with previous students who were from the same home jurisdiction which they found very helpful. The panel heard that staff were proactive in contacting all students to ask if they required any extra guidance and support and students appreciated this.

The panel heard that BPTC students tend to keep themselves to themselves for the most part and that they are comfortable to remain in the room allocated specifically for BPTC students. However, some BPTC students do mentor LLB students and mootings is done across programmes so there are opportunities for students to mix with those on other courses. Students stated that the intense and short nature of the course, as well as the pressure of applying for pupillage or doing CV-enhancing activities like mini-pupillages, means that interacting with other students or participating in wider university activities is not a priority for them. The panel **recommends** that the University of Law consider the possibility of encouraging more networking between GDL, LPC and BPTC students, given the importance of the barrister/solicitor relationship to students' future careers **(Recommendation 3)**.

The University of Law has a Future Pupil Programme which consolidates the activities and services previously available to students with some additions to make it easier for students to access. The programme includes big networking events as well as smaller workshops and one-on-one support. Students said they find practitioner events very useful – for example, students have done bail applications in front of practitioners. They also enjoy the wide range of networking opportunities available.

Students were also very positive about the careers service at the University of Law in Birmingham. Several of the students whom the panel met had made appointments with the service to look through pupillage applications and the feedback received was in-depth and helpful. Students may also access the careers service prior to the start of the course. Students who are not interested in seeking pupillage have also had helpful guidance from the service and feedback on their CV.

The panel also heard that many students had found it difficult and expensive to go to London for Inns events. Some students had been more able to attend qualifying sessions during Inns weekends but others had been unable to get a place on weekends so had to go to weekday evening sessions in London. However, students conceded that it was easier to get to London from Birmingham than other regional centres.

9. Learning resources (Library and IT)

As there had been no major changes to library facilities since the visit in 2015, the panel did not request to view library facilities on this occasion. The students whom the panel met were happy with the resources available to them both in their BPTC-specific room and in the main library.

10. Equality and diversity

Teaching staff conduct the interviews and oral skills assessments which form part of the selection process for the course. These are conducted without knowledge of the candidate's background or prior education experience. Teaching staff said that this gives students from non-traditional backgrounds a chance to display their potential.

The University of Law has Equality and Diversity policies to which all its sites comply.

Additional comments

N/A

Good practice, distinguishing features

- The panel commends the teaching staff for being up-to-date, linking teaching materials to practice, their evident approachability and having a good rapport with students.
- The panel commends the programme of extra-curricular practitioner-led activities.
- The panel was pleased to note the whole-hearted enthusiasm of the students for all aspects of their experience at Birmingham.
- The panel was also pleased to note the appreciation of the students for the way in which the institution as a whole took them through the selection process in a way that made them feel individually valued.

Conclusions: recommendation on accreditation/approval/continuing approval	
Continuing approval with recommendations.	
Recommendations	
The following recommendations must be addressed:	
Recommendation 1	Ensure that the BPTC action plan reflects more strategic direction as well as more immediate operational issues.
Recommendation 2	Give careful thought to the most appropriate point at which a decision is made regarding the viability of the part-time route, bearing in mind the potential impact on applicants.
Recommendation 3	Consider the possibility of encouraging more networking between GDL, LPC and BPTC students, given the importance of the barrister/solicitor relationship to students' future careers.

Response by the Provider (maximum one page)

The University of Law welcomes the comments of the BSB panel and notes with pleasure both the good practice and distinguishing features listed.

In relation to the recommendations:

Recommendation 1

The University will ensure that the action plan will include both strategic and operational matters.

Recommendation 2

Rather than wait until the last point allowed by the University's policy on course cancellation, the course for 2016-17 was cancelled and all students alerted and offered alternative places and compensation far in advance of this date. For the 2017-18, we are happy to say that the numbers for a viable cohort have been reached. However, the numbers accepting were very closely monitored on a weekly basis to ensure that proper decisions could be made as early as feasible.

Recommendation 3

There are a number of events at which the BPTC students get the opportunity to mix with LPC and GDL students. A few are set out here but the list is not exhaustive. There will be a number of BPTC related events in 2017-18, as last year. All GDL and 3rd year LL.B students will also be invited.

In addition, there will be University wide events and talks by guest speakers and all students are invited to these and so there is ample opportunity for cross course networking.

Also, new for 2017-18 all of the class reps (all groups, all courses) will automatically be part of a student social committee. The aim of the committee will be to organise social events etc. that all students will be invited to.

There is also a joint party/social event planned at the start of term for all courses.