

## Research Summary

# Student experiences of Equality and Diversity on Bar Training Courses



### Research Background

The Bar Standards Board (BSB) is committed to ensuring that access to training for the Bar is open to all on an equal basis and that all training providers meet their obligations to students as enshrined in the Equality Act 2010. Among other duties, the BSB is responsible for setting training requirements for those who wish to qualify and practise as barristers in England and Wales, and ensuring that the Bar better reflects the communities it serves.

To address this commitment and elaborate on the findings of the research on vocational training providers' approaches to equality and diversity, the BSB has commissioned additional research to further explore students' experiences on the Bar training courses. The research was undertaken by YouGov to gain a better understanding of students' awareness of their providers' Equality and Diversity policies and initiatives, experiences or involvement with the equality and diversity issues on the course, and to assess the extent to which they are familiar with the BSB's work promoting equality and diversity in training for the Bar.

### Key Findings

The research involved in-depth one-on-one interviews conducted virtually from July to September 2021 with 40 students undertaking a Bar training course in the 2020/21 academic year. The research sample included a mix of students from different educational, demographic and socio-economic backgrounds, part time and full time, overseas and home students undertaking a Bar training course at eight providers inside and outside of London.

**Awareness** - The research suggests that the level of knowledge of the vocational training providers' Equality and Diversity policies and initiatives was low for both home and overseas students. However, those students who undertook undergraduate degrees at the same university or used additional support tended to have higher levels of recall. Overall, students would welcome more information on the Equality and Diversity policies, events, training and support provided via a range of media throughout the year, not just at the start of the course. Similarly, many would welcome more clarity over the BSB's responsibilities, in particular around the work with the providers in relation to complaints procedure and reasonable adjustments.

**Impact of Covid-19** - The research found that Covid-19 had a substantial impact on students' experiences on the Bar training courses with limited face to face interaction, delays in exams and challenges in accessing online materials. These circumstances may have contributed to lower awareness of the training providers' initiatives and policies around equality and diversity, amount of career and pupillage support, social and networking opportunities and overall impression of the culture on the Bar training courses. Although the Future Bar Training (FBT) reforms have led to greater flexibility in the delivery of training, the pandemic had a strong impact on the logistics of organising this, particularly for students remaining overseas, who sometimes had to deal with inconveniently timed classes and assessments.

**Recruitment** - Overall, students had little knowledge of their training providers' approach to recruitment. Many assumed that the process was fair, however, there was a belief that more could be done to attract and support students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Overall, the majority of the participants felt that their courses had a diverse group of students from the UK and overseas. However, it was noted that more could be done to better integrate the two student populations in classes, seminars and coursework.

**Reasonable Adjustments** - Experiences with reasonable adjustments were generally positive. However, awareness varied depending on whether there was a need to use them or not. Most students noted that providers made efforts to promote reasonable adjustments support, in particular around exam time.

**Monitoring and Evaluation** - Most students were unaware of how their providers monitor success of the equality and diversity initiatives. Although feedback was rarely given on equality and diversity issues explicitly, students were asked to provide feedback on individual modules and on their course as a whole. Nonetheless, the frequency of this varied by provider – some gave regular feedback whilst others only did so once or twice over the year. Therefore, it was suggested that the universities could be asking for more regular feedback, particularly given that the Bar training courses are typically taken in a one-year period. More could also be done to make it clear how the feedback was used to inform the development of the equality and diversity initiatives.

**Bullying Discrimination and Harassment** - Little evidence was found of bullying, discrimination and harassment being present on the Bar training courses, although a small number of participants felt that overseas students could face discrimination, particularly around language proficiency. Some students thought that the lack of face-to-face interaction this academic year due to the pandemic may have helped to reduce such incidents. In addition, the majority of the participants stated they were unsure how to deal with incidents of bullying, discrimination or harassment and had limited awareness of their training provider's procedures or who to contact if those issues came up.

**Student Recommendations** - Most students were unaware of how and when the policies were developed with some saying they would have welcomed an opportunity to provide more input to reflect real experiences. Furthermore, those students who had faced issues with their providers would have welcomed more direct communication and reassurance from the BSB.

### How will the BSB use these findings?

Equality and Diversity policies and support initiatives are generally set centrally by universities rather than by the department/law schools running the Bar courses. The BSB sets minimum requirements for the provision of Bar course training in its Authorisation Framework and its regulatory role is limited to ensuring that those requirements have been met. This analysis was used to develop our evidence base around vocational training providers' approaches to equality and diversity and their implementation on the Bar training courses. In addition, the findings of this study were used to inform our [Research and Evaluation Strategy](#) and will be considered as part of our wider work on equality and diversity. Furthermore, we will carry out a thematic review of the admissions arrangements of authorised training providers and how they ensure that standards are maintained once a student is admitted and what systems are in place to ensure that a student develops to their full potential, whatever their starting point.

The findings also fed into the development of a new [Bar Training: who does what](#) webpage and informed our establishment of a student liaison group. Finally, the research will be shared with the vocational training providers to encourage best practice and raise awareness of the equality and diversity issues on the Bar training courses.

The main report can be found at <https://www.barstandardsboard.org.uk/media-centre/research-and-statistics/research-reports/>