

BAR  
STANDARDS  
BOARD

REGULATING BARRISTERS

**Thematic review of vocational Bar course training providers'  
admissions arrangements and how they support student  
progression**

## **Acknowledgements**

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BPP University

Cardiff University

City Law School

The Inns of Court College of Advocacy

Manchester Metropolitan University

Northumbria University

Nottingham Trent University

The University of Law

University of the West of England

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## Executive Summary

The Bar Standards Board's (BSB) Supervision team conducts thematic reviews to examine, in depth, a specific topic or theme relating to an area of our regulatory functions. This thematic review was focussed on the providers that the BSB authorises to deliver the post-graduate, vocational component of Bar training (known as Authorised Education and Training Organisations or AETOs, and referred to here as "providers"). The review was designed to obtain assurance that their admissions policies and procedures continue to meet the standards required in the [BSB's Authorisation Framework](#), that they enable standards to be maintained once a student is admitted and that systems are in place to ensure that each student develops to their full potential, whatever their starting point.

This report has been prepared to provide stakeholders with information on the findings from the thematic review. The report outlines the review methodology, findings of our enquiry, our evaluation of these findings and next steps.

The review was informed by the following wider context:

- The greater flexibility introduced as a fundamental part of the Bar training reforms in how courses are designed and implemented. Providers were authorised to deliver new Bar courses from 2020, following our reforms to Bar training.
- Themes emerging from research and reports conducted and published by the BSB, including data on results and student progress at each provider.
- The removal of the Bar Course Aptitude Test (BCAT) in July 2022 and concerns expressed by some stakeholders about the impact this might have on admissions standards.
- Research carried out by the Solicitors Regulation Authority on differential attainment.
- Our review of the standards, rules and decision-making processes for the academic component of Bar training.

The review, which spanned the years 2020-2023, comprised a combination of desk-based research and fieldwork. The team conducted the review between September 2023 and August 2024. The participants were drawn from nine providers and combined the use of quantitative and qualitative data. The team examined the application of providers' policies and processes, which are the mechanisms for providers to meet the requirements of the Authorisation Framework.

The review comprised three phases:

- Phase 1 involved developing the review methodology and tools, and conducting desk-based research. This included a review of academic articles regarding practices in the Higher Education sector in admissions and supporting students' progress; a literature review of previous BSB research reports; a review of each institution's documentation and responses within their original applications to become authorised as AETOs; results data for centralised and local assessments; and monitoring reports submitted annually by the providers as part of their reflective reviews. This served as a baseline that assisted with the development of tools and techniques to undertake the fieldwork.

- Phase 2 involved carrying out focus group sessions with staff and students in the providers. There were variations among providers regarding staff representatives. Most had a mixture of Bar course and centralised teams, such as admissions and careers services. Some were drawn from several departments with specific remits, whilst others had fewer, although similar functions were carried out. Student groups typically consisted of 5-6 members, but occasionally there were more or less, depending on what assessments were underway at the time and the students' availability away from studying.
- Phase 3 involved analysing the findings and evaluating these for reporting purposes. As well as this overall report, we prepared tailored reports for each provider.

### *Key Findings*

Overall, we are assured that providers are meeting the standards in the Authorisation Framework in relation to their admissions policies and processes, how they enable standards to be maintained once a student is admitted and that systems are in place to ensure that each student develops to their full potential, whatever their starting point. There were many examples of good practice across the topic areas; the BSB can promote and develop these with the providers in order to continue to raise standards. The key findings are summarised below and set out in more detail in the report and annexes:

- The entry requirements that are set for prospective students to register for the Bar courses are appropriate and in line with the Authorisation Framework.
- All providers administer the admissions procedures in a robust manner and staff undertake appropriate eligibility checks. Admissions staff are trained to conduct eligibility checks and have appropriate internal and external stakeholders with whom to engage.
- In general, all providers adopt a “whole institution” approach to admitting and supporting students to meet their potential. The way in which they do this aligns with good practice as identified in the literature review.
- Most activity undertaken by all providers in maintaining standards is appropriate and successful. However, there are areas requiring further exploration in order to raise standards, such as providing students with sufficient and consistent feedback.
- There is evidence that all providers provide students with support to progress their careers both during their Bar course and many months after their course has been completed, signalling a dedication to assisting students with their onward career. However, there is also some work to be done in raising standards in this area and there is an opportunity for the BSB and providers to collaborate further on this.

The findings of the review assist the BSB in its overall strategy of being a proactive, consumer-focused regulator, anchored in an intelligence-based understanding of the market we regulate. It assists the BSB in continuing to improve our public protection responsibilities and deliver our gatekeeping and supervision functions efficiently and effectively.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1. Aims

The aims of the thematic review were:

- a) To review providers' admissions policies and processes to obtain assurance that they meet the standards required in the Authorisation Framework.
- b) To review providers' policies and processes to obtain assurance that they enable standards to be maintained once a student is admitted and that systems are in place to ensure that each student develops to their full potential, whatever their starting point.

The review was carried out by the Supervision team between September 2023 and August 2024. This report has been prepared to provide stakeholders with information on the thematic review. The report outlines the review methodology, findings of our enquiry and our evaluation of these findings, including next steps for future BSB activity.

## 1.2. Background

In 2023 we commenced a thematic review of vocational providers' admissions arrangements and how they support student progression. The review was informed by the following context:

- The greater flexibility introduced as a fundamental part of the Bar training reforms in how courses are designed and implemented. Providers were authorised to deliver new Bar courses from 2020, following our reforms to Bar training.
- Themes emerging from research and reports conducted and published by the BSB, including data on results and student progress at each provider.
- The removal of the Bar Course Aptitude Test (BCAT) in July 2022 and concerns expressed by some stakeholders about the impact this might have on admissions standards.
- Research carried out by the Solicitors Regulation Authority on differential attainment.
- Our review of the standards, rules and decision-making processes for the academic component of Bar training.

It was agreed that an in-depth review of how providers manage recruitment and support for students on the Bar courses would help to provide assurance that rigorous admissions procedures and high standards in Bar training are being maintained in a supportive and inclusive learning environment, wherever students choose to study.

## 2. Methodology

The thematic review was designed, developed and implemented by the Supervision team and comprised a combination of desk-based research and fieldwork. It spanned the years 2020-2023. The team conducted the review between September 2023 and August 2024 in three phases:

- Phase 1 involved developing the review methodology and tools, and conducting desk-based research.
- Phase 2 involved carrying out focus group sessions with staff and students in the providers.
- Phase 3 involved analysing the findings and evaluating these for reporting purposes. Reporting methods consisted of developing an overall internal report for the BSB, an overall report for external stakeholders and tailored reports for each provider.

### 2.1. Development of review methodology

A project plan was devised and weekly meetings were organised for the team so that the project was monitored continuously. Nine out of ten providers were identified as being suitable for participating in the review (the tenth provider, University of Hertfordshire, was not running a Bar training course in the academic year 2023-24).

A literature review of previous research reports was undertaken as well as a review of each institution's documentation and responses within the original authorisation applications to become AETOs. This served as a baseline which assisted with the development of tools and techniques to undertake the fieldwork.

Following this initial work, the review methodology was developed. Visit dates were planned and then suggested as part of initial communications with the providers. Typically, providers wanted more detailed information about the sessions, however the review team was instructed to give minimal information so that our topics and questions could not be anticipated in advance. It was important that each provider's cohort of staff and students were asked the same questions under the same conditions in order for us to carry out as robust an exercise as possible and for the responses to be recorded as verbatim as possible. A "further information" email was drafted and sent out to providers.

The review team met and prepared for each visit so that a standardised approach was adopted. Two officers went on each visit – one to lead on the questions, the other to take notes. The whole team met as soon as was practical after each visit to discuss how it went and to check if any issues had occurred that had not been anticipated at the planning stages. Any issues that did occur were minimal and had no bearing on the content of the topic guides or our planned approach for conducting the sessions.

### 2.2. Visits

Visits were conducted at each provider between January and March 2024. There were variations among providers regarding staff representatives. Most had a mixture of Bar



course and centralised teams, such as admissions and careers services. Some were drawn from several departments with specific remits, whilst others had fewer, although similar functions were carried out. Student groups typically consisted of 5-6 members, but occasionally there were more or less, depending on what assessments were underway at the time and the students' availability away from studying.

### 3. Literature Review

A review of academic articles on practices in the Higher Education sector in admissions and supporting students' progress was undertaken together with previous BSB research reports, results data for centralised and local assessments, and monitoring reports submitted annually by the providers as part of their reflective reviews. In scope were:

- relevant publications relating to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at the Bar
- relevant publications about university admissions practices
- student results from the Bar course across all providers
- information provided to us by providers via annual reflective reviews, specifically relating to student attainment and well-being
- information we held from the providers' authorisation applications
- content from providers' websites

It is clear from the review of literature that the way in which institutions admit students onto courses and the way in which students are then supported to succeed, are integral to bridging the attainment gap and depend upon the development and implementation of suitable policies and procedures, (Bar Standards Board, (2023)<sup>1</sup> and Bar Standards Board, (2022)<sup>2</sup>.

#### 3.1. Universities UK

Several years ago, having a consistent approach to student admissions at universities relied upon Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA)<sup>3</sup>, which was an independent and objective voice on UK higher education admissions, to promote professionalism, fair admissions, and access to higher education, which produced advice and guidance on admissions. UCAS<sup>4</sup> has maintained the resources developed by SPA in an archive page, together with good practice admissions guides. With the demise of SPA, Universities UK<sup>5</sup> published its Fair Recruitment Code of Practice, which references the UCAS admissions principles. Being the collective voice for over 140 universities in the UK, these codes can

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<sup>1</sup> Bar Standards Board (2023) 'Report on Bar vocational training providers' equality and diversity policies and practices and on students' experiences on Bar training courses': <http://barstandardsboard.org.uk/uploads/assets/ece6932b-ea7e-4230-8ed5c92a46c95d3c/2308-Final-Vocational-Training-Providers-ED-Policies-and-Practices-Research-Report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Bar Standards Board (2022) 'Students' experiences on Bar Training Courses': <https://www.barstandardsboard.org.uk/static/3955f014-fed3-4850-81bd3a373e1be3e0/2308-Final-Student-Experiences-of-the-BTC-YouGov-report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (2013) 'Good Practice in Admissions.'

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/providers/help-and-support/good-practice/admissions-policies>

<sup>5</sup> Universities UK (2024) 'Fair Admissions Code of practice': <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/fair-admissions-code-practice>

be considered a good benchmark for assessing what good practice in this area looks like.

While specific processes and legal obligations can vary for home and international students, the code sets out where considerations and behaviours apply to either or both. Most literature focusses on undergraduate admissions procedures, which makes it difficult to be assured that there is a consistent approach to the application of standards in admissions to postgraduate courses. However, these principles are also intended to be applied to the admission of other students, including postgraduate applicants, even though the admissions processes for these students may be different. Many postgraduate courses are geared towards a professional qualification, such as training for entry to the Bar. There are likely to be different requirements for students wishing to be admitted on this type of postgraduate course to those of a prospective student wishing to pursue a career in the Allied health professions, for example.

### 3.2. Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)

Elements of the Fair Recruitment code of practice align with indicators developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, (2011) in the '*QAA Quality Code Chapter B2*' and the BSB, (2018) in the '*Authorisation Framework*'.

The [QAA Quality Code Chapter B2](#) sets out indicators of sound practice for higher education institutions and, in addition to relevant publications and the BSB [Authorisation Framework](#) indicators, these served as useful standards to benchmark against when developing the topic guides.

The QAA indicators include the importance of institutions:

- having policies and procedures for the recruitment and admission of students to higher education that are fair, clear and explicit and are implemented consistently;
- making decisions regarding admissions to higher education by those equipped to make the required judgements and competent to undertake their roles and responsibilities;
- having promotional materials and activities that are accurate, relevant, current, accessible and provide information that will enable applicants to make informed decisions about their options;
- having transparent entry requirements, both academic and non-academic, which are used to underpin judgements made during the selection process for entry;
- informing applicants of the obligations placed on prospective students at the time the offer of a place is made; and
- explaining to applicants who have accepted a place, arrangements for the enrolment, registration, induction and orientation of new students and ensuring that these arrangements promote efficient and effective integration of entrants fully as students.

### 3.3. BSB Authorisation Framework

The Authorisation Framework contains the following requirements and [indicators](#), with supporting [guidance](#), which are particularly relevant to this review:

#### Admissions

11.1 and 12.5: Students enrolling must have an undergraduate degree not less than a 2:2 or equivalent. This can either be a law degree or a non-law degree and post graduate diploma. In both cases they must cover the seven foundations of legal knowledge (Criminal Law, Equity and Trusts, Law of the European Union, Obligations 1 (Contract), Obligations 2 (Tort), Property/Land Law, Public Law (Constitutional Law, Administrative Law and Human Rights Law) and must enable students to demonstrate the relevant competences in the Professional Statement as set out in the Curriculum and Assessment Strategy (CAS). A student must commence the vocational component of training for the Bar within five years of completion of the academic component of training.

12.1 and 12.5: AETOs must verify that the student's English language ability is a minimum of IELTS 7.5<sup>6</sup> in each section of the test, or equivalent. The method of verification of English language ability is to be determined by the AETO.

46.5: Recruitment and admission policies and procedures that:  
in imposing any requirements, strike an appropriate balance between the key principles of High Standards and Accessibility as developed in this Authorisation Framework.

46.6: How credentials checking is carried out and policies and procedures for reporting fraudulent and/or dishonest activity to the BSB and the Inns of Court as appropriate.

#### Supporting students to meet their potential

33.2: Education and training modes (for example full-time or part-time) and pace of delivery that are suitable to the needs of students and matched to the education and training programme. Learning, teaching and training methods, practices and approaches that are appropriate for the mode and pace of delivery, support the student to develop and demonstrate the Professional Statement Competences and allow for varied learning styles, and that support equality and diversity.

37.2: A clear strategy for making the components(s) and/or pathway accessible and enabling pupils and students to achieve the best outcomes they are capable of in their education and training, as well as to demonstrating the Professional Statement Competences required for the relevant component(s) as set out in the Curriculum and Assessment Strategy.

37.5: Policies and procedures demonstrating an AETO's commitment to providing forms of assessment and appraisal that are accessible to all, reflecting the reasonable adjustment duty as set out in the Equality Act 2010 and the requirements set in the Equality Rules in the BSB Handbook, where relevant.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://ielts.org/>

37.6: Provision and maintenance of learning environments (whether physical, virtual or social) that are supportive, safe and accessible for every pupil or student, promoting dignity, courtesy and respect in their use.

44.1: The provision of flexible and where applicable cost-effective assessment opportunities (both initial assessment and re-sits).

#### Maintaining standards

46.4: Sufficient and appropriate human, physical and technological resources to provide every pupil and student with an equal and effective opportunity to develop and demonstrate the Competences as set out in the Professional Statement and implemented in the BSB's Curriculum and Assessment Strategy.

46.10: Opportunities for students and pupils to give feedback to the AETO about their experience of training at the AETO in order to shape their and others' learning experience.

46.12: How the AETO encourages a culture of high standards of performance and professionalism on the part of students and pupils.

#### Progression

33.3: Flexibility within the academic and vocational (integrated) or vocational components that delivers practice and employment opportunities for students including legal work experience.

41.1: Education and training that enhances employability and transferability to and from legal and other professions.

43.3: The provision and communication of clear, accessible and meaningful information and data that enables students to make informed decisions about the potential risks and benefits of investing in training. Information to be provided should include:

- the correlation between degree classifications and passing of the vocational component;
- first attempt passing rates;
- first attempt passing rates and success in obtaining pupillage or work-based training;
- annual overall level of success in obtaining pupillage or work-based training.

44.2: The provision of elements of Bar training that may be transferable in terms of meeting the requirements of other professional statutory and regulatory bodies.

The BSB sets out its expectations that providers fulfil certain obligations concerning support that is given to students during their time on the Bar course, in order for them to realise their full potential, via specific indicators within the Authorisation Framework. Some of these indicators have been informed by the Equality Act 2010 and the relevant requirements set in the Equality Rules in the BSB Handbook.<sup>7</sup> As regulator and

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<sup>7</sup> Bar Standards Board (2024) 'The BSB Handbook' (version 4.8) <https://www.barstandardsboard.org.uk/the-bsb-handbook.html>

standards setter, it is also important that the BSB is assured that academic standards are maintained, whilst striking an appropriate balance with our accessibility requirements. We expect providers to tailor support for students' progression to reflect their past experience and continuing needs.

### 3.4. *Equality, diversity and inclusion*

It has been established that there has been an ethnicity attainment gap in legal professional assessments,<sup>8</sup> and that in relation to the Bar course, students are largely unaware of the providers' equality and diversity policies and factors considered during the development of these, (Bar Standards Board, 2022 '*Students' experiences on Bar Training Courses*'). However, it is a mixed picture regarding attainment in careers at the Bar across a variety of protected characteristics. For example, on the one hand there has been an increase in the overall number of KCs; the proportion of female pupils; the proportion of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds; and the proportion of pupils with a declared disability. On the other hand, it has been reported that the theme persists of fewer Black/Black British KCs at the Bar in relation to the overall number of practising Black/Black British barristers, indicating that there is still a deficit of Black/British KCs as the overall number of these rise.<sup>9</sup> In addition, UK domiciled course graduates from minority ethnic backgrounds do not appear to gain pupillage in the same proportions as UK domiciled students from White ethnic backgrounds<sup>10</sup>.

Furthermore, trends continue to grow regarding an increase in the proportion of practising barristers who are female; who are from a minority ethnic background; who have primary care of a child; and who are aged 55 or more, (Bar Standards Board, 2023 '*Report on diversity at the Bar 2022*'). So this would suggest that Bar courses are delivered in an accessible and flexible manner as required by the Authorisation Framework indicators. These are designed to ensure that providers execute their responsibilities to students by implementing carefully planned and flexible strategies, policies and procedures in order to support all students, including those with protected characteristics and/or individuals who perhaps want to pursue a second career.

With respect to overseas students and those students with a first language that is not English, research suggests that a particular level of proficiency must be clearly set to minimise students being accepted onto courses with inadequate English language skills.<sup>11</sup> This reflects growing awareness amongst teaching professionals regarding the importance of non-English speaking background students requiring language support in order to succeed in their course of study. Whilst studies show that language proficiency

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<sup>8</sup> Bosch, G., Sealy, R., Alexandris-Polomarkakis, K., Makanju, D. & Helm, R.K. (2023) The ethnicity attainment gap in legal professional assessments: A systematic literature review and next steps. Interim report for the Solicitors Regulation Authority.

<sup>9</sup> Bar Standards Board (2023) 'Report on diversity at the Bar 2022': <https://www.barstandardsboard.org.uk/static/8e1b9093-b2f7-474f-b5faa3f205d26570/3b0a185d-7fa5-4a8f-a4fe29783387f40e/BSB-Report-on-Diversity-at-the-Bar-2022-FinalVersionv2.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Bar Standards Board (2023) Bar Training 2023 Statistics on enrolment, results, and student progression overall <https://www.barstandardsboard.org.uk/static/a24934ac-e2c0-48ff-beee3a049b304962/d8387a1a-8cf1-4086-b18dc076e60b29eb/Bar-Training-2023-Report-on-overall-trends-over-time.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Oliver, R., Vanderford, S. and Grote, E. (2012) 'Evidence of English language proficiency and academic achievement of non-English-speaking background students', *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31(4), pp. 541–555. doi: 10.1080/07294360.2011.653958.

is just one variable among the complex antecedents of academic achievement, there is evidence that suggests that results are influenced by the set entry level and the extent to which the discipline is linguistically challenging.<sup>12</sup> [The Professional Statement for Barristers](#) sets out the threshold competences that barristers must demonstrate at key points in their training and, ultimately, on Day 1 of practice. The Curriculum and Assessment Strategy (the [CAS](#)), which governs the delivery and assessment of vocational Bar training courses, ensures that barristers are able to demonstrate competence. The standards set out in these documents indicate the importance of linguistic competence and an expectation of proficiency is set as part of entry requirements to Bar training. Language competence is a responsible requirement from the point of view of the regulator (as standards setter), the academic tutors (from a learning and teaching perspective) and students (so that they do not embark on a course of study where they may have minimal chance of succeeding).

Taking these factors into account and, considering that the operating environment of a higher education institution is complex, from the “back room” functions of registry, finance and administration to the “front of house” functions of course delivery, the widening participation agenda has been of great consideration for many years. The drive to widen participation can be said to have been on a gradual and incremental journey, with literature suggesting this has evolved over the years. For example, by implementing “widening access” programmes, universities have been able to provide a way for those not able to apply to university via traditional routes to achieve places on courses. Recent literature suggests that widening access has to go further – it has to extend to widening participation also – so that once students are on a course, they are supported to achieve their full potential. Not only should there be new courses and modes of delivery, changes to admissions requirements and processes, but there also needs to be a transformative approach demonstrating student-centred curriculum content, more inclusive organisational structures and cultures to promote and facilitate the engagement of all students. Good practice suggests that the way to do this is for these institutions to adopt a “whole institution approach” where the infrastructure of universities works as a whole system for the benefit of those students attending.<sup>13</sup> Elements of this transformative approach are echoed in the indicators of the BSB’s Authorisation Framework.

### 3.5. *Further considerations*

The literature review took account of the main findings of the academic publications and other publications, such as those research reports published by the SRA and the BSB; information provided by providers during the authorisation application process and activities reported on by providers as part of their annual reflective reviews, which they are required to submit to the BSB’s Supervision team. What was learnt from reading these sources was incorporated into the content and prompts of the topic guides and

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<sup>12</sup> Woodrow, L. (2006). Academic success of international postgraduate education students and the role of English proficiency. University of Sydney Papers in TESOL, 1 (Paper 3, 51–70). Retrieved August 12 2024  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237441334\\_Academic\\_Success\\_of\\_International\\_Postgraduate\\_Education\\_Students\\_and\\_the\\_Role\\_of\\_English\\_Proficiency](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237441334_Academic_Success_of_International_Postgraduate_Education_Students_and_the_Role_of_English_Proficiency)

<sup>13</sup> Thomas, L (2018) ‘Access to success and social mobility involves everyone! A whole institution approach to widening participation’ *Access to success and social mobility through Higher Education: A curate’s egg?* (Edited by Billingham, S, 2018 pp209-222): 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, Emerald Publishing

these were then checked against relevant [QAA Quality Code Chapter B2](#) indicators and relevant [Authorisation Framework](#) indicators.

At the point of authorisation to deliver the Bar course, all providers submitted documentary evidence of how the Authorisation Framework indicators would be complied with. The review team undertook desk research to establish the type and content of this documentary evidence by checking original application information and the internal scoring documentation. Given that the review would take place in the fourth year of operation of the Authorisation Framework, this was useful benchmark material that assisted in the development of the topic guides and prompts.

### *3.6. BSB Centralised Examination Board reports*

The Centralised Examination Board (CEB) rigorously assesses the results of the centralised examinations to ensure that they are fair. The CEB Chair's Report of December 2022 shows that the centralised assessments remain demanding examinations with an average pass rate for the December sitting of around 56% for civil litigation and around 50% for criminal litigation. The Report also shows the variation in pass rates between different providers. The Report explains some of the factors that may lead to these variations. What is clear from these factors is that it is difficult to identify particular themes at this point in time. This is because of the variation in providers' approach to course delivery, such as having cohorts with multiple entry points or offering a "Part 1-Part 2" structured programme whereby candidates prepare for the centralised assessments in Part 1 before progressing to the examinations in the skills areas in Part 2.

### *3.7. Locally set assessments*

With respect to performance in locally set assessments, again there is a "busy" data picture. Each locally set assessment across the five subject areas (Advocacy, Conference Skills, Professional Ethics, Drafting and Opinion Writing/Legal Research) has its own assessment conditions and requirements. Data collection for these areas is still evolving. For example, until recently, providers submitted results data in a fragmented piecemeal way. However, a new system of reporting has been implemented with specific cut-off dates. We now have ready access to results data that is current for all modules at all providers. This data is helpful, but we need to explore further options so that we can better understand passing rates.

### *3.8. Providers' reflective reviews*

Providers submit an annual reflective review report to the BSB, based on a number of set questions. Providers have been asked to outline their procedures for monitoring student achievement in assessments on the post-reform Bar courses on an annual basis since 2021. Where students have not performed as well as expected, providers have embarked on reviewing statistics to look for patterns within and between cohorts. Actions emanating from these activities have resulted in providers making changes to, for instance, how the curriculum is delivered, such as swapping the order of delivery of subjects to give more lead-in time to assessments. Most providers have responded to performance issues by implementing different mechanisms for providing students with

pastoral care and support. It has been established (via various methods of feedback from Bar course providers and students) that the Bar courses, whichever provider may be delivering, are fast-paced and comprise complex subject areas that students must master within a condensed time period of around nine months (for full-time students). One provider identified that a specific issue for their institution was a theme of poor achievement for overseas students and responded to the issue by introducing an “extra” term. This additional time provides students with some broad foundation modules related to Bar training (this part of the course is not regulated by the BSB). Pastorally, students have this time to orienteer into a new way of living in an unfamiliar setting, rather than having to do this at the same time as trying to learn and study in a fast-paced postgraduate course.

## 4. Key findings

Overall, we are assured that providers are meeting the standards in the Authorisation Framework in relation to their admissions policies and processes, how they enable standards to be maintained once a student is admitted and that systems are in place to ensure that each student develops to their full potential, whatever their starting point. There were many examples of good practice across the topic areas; the BSB can promote and develop these with the providers in order to continue to raise standards. Where the review has identified some areas of concern, these are being followed up on an individual basis by the Supervision team with the relevant providers. There are some policy considerations for the BSB, which are discussed in the Recommendations section of this report. The key findings are summarised below and set out in more detail in the annexes to this report.

### 4.1. Admissions procedures

Providers typically used a variety of methods and promotional activities to provide prospective students with comprehensive information about the course and about the profession before students applied. These activities included open days, recruitment fairs and promotional material on websites, including vlogs. Students found open days and networking events extremely helpful before formally applying to the course.

*Some providers make use of alumni in the form of placing vlogs on their website, where past students tell prospective students about their experience studying there.*

Providers’ staff mentioned that their university used to link to the BSB key statistics report, but the programme lead felt that it no longer contained the same level of detail and meaningful information as it used to. The BSB should explore approaches to amending the BSB website in order to provide prospective Bar students with the most appropriate information, in an accessible format, that will assist them when deciding whether to pursue a career at the Bar,

Students had various reasons for applying. For some, they had completed their undergraduate degree at the institution and wanted to remain there as they had enjoyed the experience; some chose the provider as a result of hearing from past students about their good experience; location and proximity to home was another important factor for



some students; and cost of the course was a factor for many. In addition, there was evidence of more discerning reasons:

*One student said that their provider only accepted 2:1 degree classifications whereas another provider they knew of accepted 2:2s. The student did not like that, as when they were doing the Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL), students with lower grades on the GDL slowed the class down, so they did not want to be around students at that level on the Bar course.*

*One student initially applied to another provider but it all went through quickly and “too smoothly” so the student asked for their deposit back and chose instead an provider similar in size, but which appeared to be much more diverse in terms of the lecturing team, and there was also a pro- bono opportunity.*

Fair recruitment practices appear to have been applied by all providers. Most of them recruit via a written application method only, however there were examples of a combination of both oral and written procedures, which were appreciated by students. We are assured that providers are meeting the BSB Authorisation Framework requirements in this area and are routinely demonstrating good practice as defined in the Fair Admissions Code of Practice and the QAA Quality Code. In addition, these measures could be said to promote the model suggested by Thomas (2018).

Whilst our regulations specify that applicants must have a minimum of a 2:2 degree classification, most providers focus on applicants with 2:1 degree classifications. One provider accepts applicants with a 2:2, but they must attend a specifically designed course with a foundation term (not part of the regulated Bar course). It is aimed at those students who are predominantly from overseas to ensure that they enter the Bar course at a suitable standard.

We learnt that providers strictly applied the requirement for English language proficiency. We also received assurance that credentials checking is consistent and rigorous, and that staff undertaking these roles are appropriately trained. This was exemplified when we were told the following by one provider:

*A wholesale approach was taken in cross-checking all documentation and there had been instances of picking up forgery. The team sees hundreds of documents on a daily basis, so they know when documents do not look right. If this happens, it is referred to the compliance officer. We heard of an example where one applicant forged a Pearsons English language certificate, which the officer picked up. The team contacted the provider and the provider verified it was false.*

From our conversations with students, we received confirmation that the policies and procedures described by providers on credentials checking are robust. With respect to English language proficiency, we are assured that providers are applying good practice as highlighted by Oliver et al (2012) and Woodrow (2006) In addition, these

requirements align with those of the Authorisation Framework, the objectives of the Professional Statement competences and the CAS.

#### 4.2. Supporting students to meet their potential

Providers typically provide access to support resources such as student accommodation, printing credits, hard copy and electronic resources, career and library support. Many providers have a dedicated Bar course career and employability function.

Although there were various examples of appropriate and good practice on the part of the providers, these stood out in particular:

*All providers apply the following practice: Pre-course engagement, tailored support plans, physical accommodations, and dedicated support teams, all of which contribute to creating an inclusive learning environment.*

*Many students appreciate the small tutorial groups and quick response to emails by tutors, assigned mentors and personal tutors, which foster a sense of community and personalised attention. Several instances highlight providers' accommodations of students' individual needs, such as childcare support, flexibility with attendance and considerations for reasonable adjustment plans. There are various support mechanisms such as feedback emails and questionnaires.*

*One provider holds entry interviews within two weeks of the students starting the course to discuss background, mental health, CVs, areas of law the student is interested in and any concerns. At the end of the course, students have an exit interview where they discuss their career prospects.*

These examples align with research that a whole institution approach to supporting students while they study reaps benefits, Thomas, (2018), and could be useful in improving the student experience which had previously been a concern, Bar Standards Board (2022).

However, this topic area unfortunately elicited the most negative feedback from students and some information we received indicates that some providers are on the verge of not meeting the requirements of some indicators in the Authorisation Framework, particularly in the areas of consistency of feedback given to students, and in delivery of part-time courses. These will be areas of focus with relevant providers for the Supervision team moving forward.

Tailored feedback to individual students seems imperative to support and develop the students' competences and enhance their capabilities. Most students described the feedback as being helpful and useful as it guides them on how to change their approach and strategy to help them improve. Other students, however, felt the extent to which feedback was lacking needed improving. Quality feedback is important for students so that they can reflect upon and adapt their approach to subject area assessment. It also

assists with the “hidden curriculum” of feeling that they are supported and provided with all of the tools necessary to succeed (Thomas, 2018).

In addition, we heard that some students perceived a lack of consistency amongst tutors in the quality of feedback students received about their performance. This is an area the External Examiners (EEs) scrutinise when approving the quality assurance of marking and moderation processes, and we know that certain providers do not do this well. This is an area the BSB could consider during the upcoming review of the Authorisation Framework, in an attempt to raise standards in this regard.

Full-time and part-time students are accommodated with different modes tailored to suit diverse student needs, such as mature students or those with other commitments. However, less than half of the providers offered a part-time option to extend their provision of accessible and flexible initiatives.

From the students’ perspective, there is a mixed picture regarding the experience of part-time students. On the one hand, students told us that being on the course for a longer period of time gives them an opportunity to build a better relationship with the staff, which is beneficial for their journey on the Bar course. However, some students felt there was a lack of institutional support and there appeared to be timetabling issues at one provider. On a couple of occasions, we were concerned to hear of students’ poor experiences, such as:

*An international student applied under a disability allowance for hard copies of course materials but was denied on the ground that disability allowance does not cover international students.*

*A student previously on the full-time course is now on a part-time course and noted a significant difference between the two modes. The student felt the teaching standard was low due to classes being held at the weekend.*

We were also concerned to hear of a negative experience about unclear information about assessment arrangements. One student who moved from a full-time to a part-time mode of study told us that there was a difference in tutor availability (there were fewer) at the weekends and often classes were cancelled. The Supervision team has acted on such information before with a particular provider and will further explore this issue as a result of this feedback.

Given the number of concerns raised about part-time courses, this is an area where the BSB may want to consider doing a further thematic review, looking in more depth and across a wider sample of students to determine how representative this experience is.

One theme that emanated from the sessions with provider staff is the contention across providers that poor performance of students correlates with low attendance at lectures and tutorials. Almost all providers cited a lack of power in this regard since the new Bar courses have less prescription; the BSB removed requirements about minimum level of

attendance as part of the Future Bar Training reforms when a key driver was to reduce prescription to enable flexibility. Some providers are addressing this in their own academic regulations by setting minimum attendance requirements.

### 4.3. *Maintaining standards*

Providers inform students of the demands of the course and the expectation of professionalism and commitment required from them as soon as they embark upon their course. Providers told us that the Professional Statement competences were embedded in courses, as were links to the relevant aspects of the Curriculum and Assessment Strategy (CAS). However, we found that students struggled to describe the Professional Statement, although when coached by the review team, they did recognise and could talk about the CAS. Providers should be ensuring that students know what these documents are, how they relate to their course, and how the Professional Statement relates to the journey to becoming a practising barrister. We will address this with providers in the next scheduled Quality Workshops with Supervision in 2025.

There were various accounts of how good practice is embedded into course delivery, such as:

*providers employing barristers as tutors on the Bar course, with one differentiating between those at the Junior Bar and more experienced barristers, stating that the idea is that both types of tutor can punctuate their sessions with examples of applying teaching to their current experience at the Bar, giving students a more rounded picture of what to expect once qualified.*

*A mobile app which serves as a platform for students to answer and engage with multiple choice questions uploaded by the faculty. This allows students to build a quiz that touches on areas they struggle with. The mobile app is also an intelligent system and will give students more questions in areas that they tend not to do well on.*

We heard that most students found that their university-set mock (formative) assessments were more difficult than the final (summative) assessments, however students found this helpful as they feel more prepared when they sit their summative assessments. This gives the BSB assurance that standards are being maintained outside of the formal BSB assessment regime and indicates that generally providers are diligently using learning and teaching materials, which the BSB has no oversight of in accordance with the Authorisation Framework (learning and teaching materials fall under the auspices of the Office for Students, under their 'B conditions.')

<sup>14</sup>

Students described their approach to preparing for assessment and, generally speaking, their dedication and consistent effort was obvious. In particular, students distinguished between practice for each of the skills subjects and it is suggested that this is evidence of them preparing the groundwork for demonstrating the threshold Professional Statement competences. For example, for oral skills subjects, mocks at one provider

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-students/teaching-quality-and-tef/student-guide-to-quality-and-standards/>

are recorded and this enables students to watch them back and identify areas on which they should improve. For the written skills subjects, students at providers use feedback from mocks to then practise some drafting or opinion writing activities. It can be inferred therefore that the general ethos around maintaining high standards is strong across providers.

A theme that emerged from discussions with provider staff is that during the last few years, education has become a more refined transactional experience between student and institution. Staff have to balance helping students who present as having mental health issues (an occurrence which has risen dramatically in the past few years) with tackling poor behaviour and enforcing appropriate discipline, as these factors very much influence the maintenance of standards.

#### 4.4. Progression

In terms of provision relating to student progression, there are many positive initiatives at work across providers:

*There is a wide selection of extra-curricular activities on offer and being appropriately advertised. These include voluntary work, work placements, pro bono programmes, projects, mooting, mock trials, court visits, sessions with law firms and legal professionals.*

However, some students had difficulty in accessing opportunities, mostly down to time constraints. This seems to have been recognised by some providers and mitigation in place includes:

*Examples of good practice that we saw were providers tailoring the opportunities for students in such a way that made it feasible to do alongside their studies, and where time off was provided to those students who had secured mini pupillages.*

Various activities are undertaken by providers in an effort to prepare students for pupillage, including mock interviews, setting up mini pupillages and navigating the Pupillage Gateway. However, there was some negative feedback regarding progression relating to students not wishing to pursue pupillage or those not wishing to pursue a career at the Bar.

Seven of the providers spoke about the importance of maintaining relationships with their alumni who have entered other professions. Having those individuals return to the provider to speak with current students or deliver careers talks or presentations can provide more realistic and practical examples of alternative career routes. This is an avenue all providers may want to consider.

One provider has an option for “unsuccessful” students (ie those who do not get pupillage) to study SQE1 free of charge.

Careers advice and support is available to students at all providers and its availability ranges from 18 months to 5 years post-completion of the Bar course. This is a good

example of some providers supporting students to progress long after their course finishes.

However, students typically told us that there was little information or guidance provided by providers in terms of career opportunities, which is not the position that staff from providers have portrayed. The BSB Authorisation Framework indicator 41.1 requires providers to evidence how they enhance employability and transferability to and from legal and other professions and this area may warrant further scrutiny during the next cycle of re-authorisation.

## 5. Next Steps

The Supervision team is following up with individual providers by way of providing them with a tailored feedback report following our thematic review visit. Where applicable, actions will be set where we have identified issues.

The Supervision team holds Quality Workshops each year, attended by representatives from providers and EEs. We will explore certain topics in more depth with providers in the next scheduled workshops, such as the approaches to communication of the Professional Statement competences and the CAS.

The BSB will consider other matters that emerged from this thematic review as follows:

- The review of the Authorisation Framework that is planned in 2025/26 provides an opportunity to review whether it should be amended to reflect the BSB's expected standards in the following areas:
  - Standards for formative and mock assessments, such as requiring providers to adopt a consistent approach regarding levels of challenge for students in readiness for summative assessments.
  - How providers should provide assessment feedback to students, for both formative and summative assessments (in the meantime, the EE's will continue to monitor this).
  - The extent to which providers provide expertise and guidance for students who may wish to progress careers outside the Bar.
- We have commenced planning for the scheduled re-authorisation of providers. This provides an opportunity to review the following with providers:
  - There were good practice examples of providers assisting students to take advantage of extra-curricular activities, for example by including these within the course timetable. The BSB will further explore whether this model could be adopted by other providers, to further support students.
  - There was significant variation across providers regarding the careers services made available to students post-graduation. This ranged from 18

months to 5 years. The BSB could encourage some providers to offer this type of careers support for longer via the re-authorisation process.

- We will also consider focussed reviews in the following areas:
  - Student experiences of part-time provision, given that some areas of concern have been identified during this review.
  - This review has furnished the BSB with a wealth of information regarding resources available across providers for disabled students. One student reported a negative experience during a visit but, more widely, a growing number of students and providers are reporting issues in the area of reasonable adjustments. It is important that disabled students who meet the admissions criteria are enabled, by means of reasonable adjustments, to acquire, demonstrate and apply the knowledge and skills set out in the Professional Statement. However, providers and students are increasingly turning to the BSB for guidance about what is considered reasonable in the context of professional practice.
- A review of the BSB website to better present information on Bar training, including the statistical reports, to improve access to information for prospective students.

## Annex 1: Detailed findings - the staff perspective

### 1. Admissions

#### 1.1. Entry requirements

The entry requirements for seven providers include a minimum degree classification of 2:1 degree in Law or with a Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL) incorporating the seven areas of legal knowledge, with most stating a 2:2 will be considered, particularly if there are mitigating circumstances. One provider has a minimum entry requirement of a 2:1 degree classification in Law or with a GDL, with a 2:2 classification not being considered. One provider stated that related work experience is considered.

One provider has diversified and created a new course, which aims to extend the traditional timeframe of the Bar course, so this provider offers a typical Bar course and the other course it offers has a foundation/orienteering aspect added, delivered over an additional semester. For the typical Bar course, the entry requirements are a 2:1 and above and for the other course, the requirements are a 2:2 or above.

All providers confirmed that a pass at IELTS 7.5 is a requirement for non-English speaking background students.

#### 1.2. Application process

All providers have some sort of support on offer to prospective students prior to them making an application. This takes the form of the providers offering open days, webinars, and dedicated staff attending relevant careers fairs.

All providers use a central admissions team, in that applications are initially sifted there, with the exception of one provider where the initial sifting is undertaken by the Bar course leader and then the short-listed candidates' information is subsequently passed to the central admissions team to make offers.

Seven providers have a written application process only. All applications are made online.

Two providers use a combination of a written and in-person (via video link) process of recruitment onto the Bar course. Of these two, one employs a Fair Recruitment policy, where no identifiers are used and those undertaking the sift are blind regarding the characteristics of the applicant. Once short listed, applicants are invited for a short interview and to undertake an advocacy exercise. This provider offers appointments in evenings and weekends. The other provider adopts a similar approach, however the process incorporates an initial presentation by faculty staff, followed by students being given a set of papers to prepare a plea in mitigation; they get 40 minutes to prepare it, then they have to turn their cameras on and have five minutes to deliver the plea in mitigation, heard by a tutor. Then there is a short interview with the student.

The application process for three providers asks for evidence of commitment to the profession, such as mini-pupillages, placements or marshalling.



The process for overseas students at most providers is the same as those for UK-domiciled students. One provider uses an agent abroad and this agent is given training on the provider's requirements. Another provider uses a dedicated overseas team, assisted by law partners in that country.

### *1.3. Open and fair recruitment policies and procedures*

In exploring how the providers strike a balance between maintaining high standards and accessibility, we found that most providers' websites contained information about entry requirements. Some providers make use of alumni in the form of placing vlogs on the website, where past students tell prospective students about their experience studying there. Others have a presence at Law fairs and open days, and package all of these activities into a "welcome" promotion.

Providers told us that prospective students were encouraged to talk to members of the teaching team and chat about the course generally. These discussions also included giving interested individuals information about the pro bono work experience that is offered and covered pupillage advice. We found that providers' websites covered the support/pastoral care available, course structure and history of the course.

The majority of providers told us that students are given support from admissions staff throughout the recruitment process. One provider mentioned having input from the Learning Support team from the start of the admissions process. Some providers highlighted that admissions staff had been given Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training.

One provider has an international office and staff from here travel across the world. Staff are briefed about the course and other appropriate information, such as the visa process, by admissions staff before travelling and there is a mechanism for international staff to refer anything back to admissions or Bar course staff. One staff member had recently been in Kuala Lumpur and arranged for appointments for prospective students to talk to the Bar course staff live via an online link.

One provider told us that the university could be better at employing recruitment processes and initiatives. Staff said that the university used to link to the BSB key statistics report, but the programme lead felt that it no longer contained the same level of detail and meaningful information as it used to do. The same provider mentioned that the Inns used to also provide a health warning (this pointed out the number of pupillages available on average per year and the number of applications of pupillage per year), which they no longer do. The programme lead at this institution was of the view that people committing to a career at the Bar should be researching thoroughly themselves. There is a huge amount put on providers, but students should be doing their own self-education research as well, as they need to know what they're committing to. The BSB is currently reviewing how to better present information on the website on Bar training, including the statistical reports, to improve access to information for prospective students.

#### 1.4. Eligibility checks

Providers told us of their procedures to conduct eligibility checks. Some providers do this via a dedicated validation team, while at other providers, the credential checking remit is under the admissions team. These checks include checking academic transcripts, Inn membership details, photographic ID, and ability to speak English fluently.

Across all providers, the staff who undertake the credentials checking are trained and appear to be experienced in their roles. The ratio of size of team undertaking these checks appeared to be suitable for the size of provider. Expertise ranged from internally trained officers being supervised by more experienced staff in a centralised setting within the admissions department, to a dedicated verification team who had [Ecctis](#) training and had procedures in place to actively monitor for changes to the Ecctis database. Some providers used [Enic](#) which is managed by Ecctis on behalf of the UK Government. Both organisations are concerned with verification of international qualifications and visa checking. Staff also have established good working relationships with these agencies. The decision-making mechanisms across providers involved more than one member of staff so that consistency in decision making was being constantly monitored and applied.

One provider explained that the approach taken in cross-checking all documentation had led to instances of picking up forgery. They said that the team sees hundreds of documents on a daily basis, so they know when documents “don’t look right”. If this happens, it is referred to the compliance officer. We heard of an example where one applicant forged an English language certificate, which the officer picked up. The team contacted Pearsons who verified it was false.

In terms of training, one provider told us that staff are given documentation and taught online in a webinar style, taking them through the system and ensuring they understand what to look out for concerning Bar course applications. Each person has an Ectis account to check degree equivalences. Once supervisors are satisfied with what staff are doing, they are left to it, but new members of staff are spot checked to ensure that they are meeting the required policies and processes. The law school meets regularly with the admissions team and international agents.

We asked one provider how they know that academic transcripts are bona fide and we heard that agents are trained by the provider, but for various different markets there are different systems in place. This particular provider uses third party verifiers outside the institution who verifies documents directly with the originating university by asking for confirmation of the student and their degree. The provider then gets verification of the documentation through the agent and copies the verification on their system.

#### 1.5. IELTS verification

Providers check English language proficiency via the [IELTS](#) database or via the [Pearson PTE](#) database.

If students have a degree not completed in the UK, providers require that students do IELTS or PTE as a condition. For other students from overseas who have completed an undergraduate degree in the UK, it is accepted that their command of the English language is proficient. Providers confirmed that, given IELTS has a 2-year expiry, if a student supplied one that is out of date, it would not be accepted. The student would be asked to redo the test again and provide one within the timeframe of the course starting.

Overall, providers continued to comply with the expectations placed upon them at authorisation in that they confirmed during our interviews that they require entry credentials of a minimum of a 2:2 undergraduate law degree or GDL covering the seven foundations of legal knowledge and fluency in English language. We ascertained also that at least one provider has placed the entry requirements at a minimum of a 2:1 degree classification. Appropriate credentials checking is undertaken by all providers by teams with specialist knowledge in detecting fraudulent documentation, who undergo regular training.

## **2. Supporting students to meet their potential**

### *2.1. Modes and pace of delivery of the Bar course*

It is evident across providers that there is a comprehensive approach to ensuring students attain the best outcomes possible. The pace and structure of delivery adhere to external factors such as the BSB learning outcomes and Inns' requirements. Both full-time and part-time (2-5 years) students are accommodated with different modes tailored to suit diverse student needs, such as mature students or those with other commitments.

There are five providers that only offer the full-time mode, which does not allow flexibility for students on the course. The providers that offer the part-time course can offer students a bespoke course which fits around their external commitments. The other additional benefit of providers offering full-time and part-time is that students can transfer from one mode to the other.

There is a variation of cohort size across the providers, which has a considerable impact on students' best outcomes. On one hand students can benefit from being in small groups for particular seminars or lectures, however there can be a negative side to cohort size. Students at one provider told us of a tutor having bereavement leave early in the term and the university had no back up staff to infill, meaning there were around 40 students in one seminar when it should have been 20. This scenario appears to have been repeated when another situation arose resulting in a shortage of tutors, with students being frustrated that the university had not learnt from past experiences and put the appropriate measures in place.

All providers design the timetable for students with a limit of the number of hours per week, to ensure students do not feel overburdened. Emphasis is placed on the best time for students to begin the centralised assessments. One provider holds entry interviews within two weeks of the students starting the course to discuss background, mental health, CVs, areas of law the student is interested in and any concerns. At the

end of the course, students have an exit interview where they discuss their career prospects.

Only one provider mentioned the use of recognition of prior learning and that students pay for the outstanding units only.

Providers offer various support mechanisms, including academic advisors, pastoral support, drop-in sessions, personal tutors, mentoring schemes, and dedicated student welfare officers. Their support covers a wide range of areas, including mental health, and neurodiversity. Personalised support is emphasised, with tutors actively reaching out to students who may need assistance. Attendance monitoring systems, early intervention processes, and regular check-ins with students are in place to ensure engagement and address any issues promptly.

Extensive learning resources are provided, including lectures from other fields, seminars, self-study sessions, recorded materials, and virtual learning environments. The resources aim to facilitate learning and revision, catering to different learning styles and preferences.

Opportunities for career development, networking, mock interviews, and guest speakers are integrated into the curriculum to enhance students' employability and professional skills at one provider. Staff at three providers referred to the careers resources that are made available to students. Furthermore, it is evident that providers ensure inclusivity and accessibility of all students, including those with disabilities or from diverse backgrounds. Pre-course engagement, tailored support plans, physical accommodations, and dedicated support teams contribute to creating an inclusive learning environment.

Three providers told us that they gather feedback from students and stakeholders to continuously improve their support systems and course delivery. Regular reviews, course committees and adjustments based on student input demonstrate a commitment to enhancing the learning experience.

## *2.2. Accessibility of assessment and appraisal formats*

Providers demonstrated a strong emphasis on ensuring accessibility and inclusivity in assessment and appraisal formats for all students, including those with disabilities. Seven providers take a proactive approach to accessibility by signposting support services right from the start of the course and reaching out to students who disclose disabilities during the application process. One provider mentioned piloting a study plan for students who are missing classes and not meeting their potential. This is because, they say, students are reluctant to come forward for reasonable adjustments.

There is a focus on clear communication through various channels such as emails, website, virtual learning environments (VLEs), and student unions to ensure that students are aware of available support and how to access it. Providers are willing to make reasonable adjustments based on individual student needs, whether disclosed during application or later in the course. This flexibility extends to considering late diagnoses and accommodating changing circumstances. Disability services work in

conjunction with academic staff, course tutors, and other support teams to implement reasonable adjustments effectively. Providers have established policies and strategies for equality, diversity, and inclusion, with regular reviews and updates to ensure compliance and effectiveness. These policies are integrated into various aspects of academic operations and supported by staff training initiatives.

Providers provide a range of student support services, including mental health support, safeguarding and pastoral care to promote overall well-being and inclusivity. Seven providers mentioned support available such as private counselling, producing toolkits for staff to support students, speaking to alumni about previous experience with disability on the course and how this could be improved, face to face feedback, helplines, mental health first aiders, assessment scrutiny documents, entry interviews to discuss support needs, personal language plan and provider websites links to other sources of information and support.

### *2.3. The application of the principle of Affordability in assessment opportunities*

Six providers include both initial assessment and re-sits in the course fee, with additional charges for re-enrolment or overseas assessments. One provider allows payments for course parts incrementally, reducing financial commitment and risk for students. Additional support, such as extra sessions and provisions of materials, is available for students. Some providers accommodate international students with options for overseas assessments and considerations for visa validity.

One provider mentioned the increase of fees due to employing barristers to teach the course. Four providers mentioned the LLM course and the postgraduate funding it provides students. A couple of providers provide students with a printing allowance. Almost all the providers provide e-books rather than hard copies. Hard copies are provided if the student has a learning support plan in place that recommends this as a reasonable adjustment.

### *2.4. Mechanisms for identifying struggling students*

A couple of providers asked that the BSB bring back the prescriptive rules about attendance which were removed as part of the Future Bar Training reforms.

Providers track attendance rigorously, with almost all providers telling us that there is a correlation between student attendance and student achievement, that is, if student attendance is high, the better their chance of succeeding in passing modules. By tracking attendance, providers are able to identify struggling students and early signs of disengagement. We were told a few months after visiting providers that one has decided to change its academic regulations to emphasise the student's responsibility to attend lectures and tutorials.

Emphasis is placed on early identification of struggling students, with interventions implemented before issues escalate. Seven providers assign a personal tutor to students, who intervene when attendance or performance issues arise, offering feedback and guidance. Practice assessments, mock results reviews and regular feedback sessions help address academic challenges promptly.

Students are encouraged to provide feedback anonymously through various channels, such as module evaluations. This feedback informs continuous improvement efforts and enhances the learning experience.

Providers collect and analyse various data points, including attendance records, assessment results and demographic information. One provider mentioned that previously it was difficult to obtain data as it used to be entered manually and was not connected to the university's system, however mechanisms for collecting data at the university have now improved. The data helps to identify trends and disparities, such as attainment gaps based on gender, disability or other characteristics. One provider looks at course material and provides feedback (like an Equality Impact Assessment) on issues they identify as having a negative impact on particular students.

One provider provides a "student journey" advisor for non-academic matters. A student journey advisor is allocated once it becomes apparent that a student is struggling on the course. The same provider has student diversity advocates who provide insight into student backgrounds. This is a paid position to improve the experience at the provider.

### **3. Maintaining Standards**

#### *3.1. Deployment of resources*

All providers highlighted that the Professional Competences are reflected in the course materials and runs through everything that they teach on the programme – they are embedded into every single module, from the learning outcomes down to the online teaching platform/virtual learning environment. Providers try to make the links to the Competences and the CAS clear to students at the beginning of the course during the induction, signposting students to the links to the documents.

#### *3.2. Human resources*

Providers spoke of lecturers who teach on the course being practitioners, either as solicitors or barristers. One provider maintains a certain proportion of freelance staff still in practice. Providers identify this as enhancing classroom experience for students, since students are being taught by tutors who have experienced the profession. Another provider spoke of there being a mix of tutors from very experienced practitioners to newer, more junior staff. For this provider, they encourage their junior staff to speak up about matters concerning the course as they believe it keeps the teaching relevant and fresh. They also provide students with an academic coach and tailored teaching support to guide them through the course and assist them with their Bar career aspirations.

One provider spoke of taking tutors from their professional context and accelerating their training to become successful tutors in a vocational setting. The provider stated that the solicitors/barristers do not need to have acquired a full teaching qualification as the university offers a rigorous induction and support to be effective in the classroom. The same university spoke of putting in significant effort to help tutors understand what their role is as an academic, teaching the Bar course. By helping practitioners to understand that they are facilitators and key in the passing on of information to students, in this way the provider uses human resources to provide every student with an equal

and effective opportunity to develop and demonstrate the Competences on the Bar course.

The size of student groups for workshops and sessions and the learning spaces where students are taught was also highlighted as important to enhance the quality of learning. One provider spoke about there being specific rooms for Bar course students which are smaller, since classes are taught in sizes of 18, and another provider spoke of there being pods of tables where students are given whiteboards to feed back. A different provider said they group their students into diverse groups in order for there to be a mix of gender, age, ethnicity and nationality etc. in the student workshop groups. This is good practice as it sets student expectations of equality, diversity and inclusion and ensures students deal with one another appropriately, as they would in practice as barristers when handling clients, for instance.

One provider said their students are encouraged to avail themselves of the disability services - another vital human resource.

The career advisors are also instrumental as a human resource so students can develop the Competences set out in the Professional Statement. Some providers spoke of their expert career advisors who are the next layer of support for students to help get them through the course and into their chosen career. At one provider, students are asked if they would like to witness pupillage advocacy on Circuit, where they are given the opportunity to see barristers undertaking their training and receiving feedback.

### 3.3. *Physical resources*

There were many physical resources highlighted by the providers such as:

- Access to student accommodation - a place for them to stay/study whilst completing the course.
- Free loan/hire of a laptop from the library for students.
- A mix of hardcopy and online resources as part of the fee.
- 24/7 library services which offer a huge range of resources available in hardcopy and online.
- Printing credits for students if students prefer to have the hardcopy.
- Court rooms and court furniture.

Across multi-site campuses, one provider mentioned that all their campuses have the same classroom set up for students; all campuses have a café, library space, study space, and recreational space. Although this university is not campus-based they have a Student Association/Union adding to the student university experience, so students get a sense of belonging to the university. Three providers also highlighted students having their own base room, an exclusive study area or specific rooms in the university building only for Bar students. One provider actively encourages their students to use their laptops as it supports their Digital First policy, which encourages saving paper and the provider also feels students using their laptop emulates the paperless Bar, which prepares students for practice.

Across all providers, students are encouraged to avail themselves of the disability services. Providers make physical adjustments for their students as part of an adjustment plan, and all staff must accommodate those adjustments to ensure the environment is conducive to learning for the student.

### 3.4. *Technological resources*

Providers spoke largely of their online virtual learning environment (VLE) as a technological means to support students and maintain standards. The VLE serves as a technological tool where students can find the Competences and the CAS, as well as other required and recommended reading resources and materials. One provider said that during the student orientation they take students through a tour of the VLE, which highlights each section and explains how the VLE works. Similarly, another provider said that students are given technological guidance and training at the beginning of the year alongside sources of support such as technical skills, support and learning education and development support. It was said that students can access their VLE on their tablets/laptops/phones at a provider, ensuring they get the same experience on their smart devices as on a computer, whilst still being able to access everything they need to. Staff undergoing additional technology training was also highlighted, as it is imperative staff also know what is available for students. The structure of the VLE also acts as a technological resource, with some providers having a “PEC” model – Prepare, Engage, Consolidate. Students have to prepare before the session, engage in the session, then consolidate what they do after the session, where they might have to answer questions or reflect on what they have learnt.

All providers highlighted the technological resources they provide in the classrooms such as recording equipment available in the teaching rooms, and all recordings having captions automatically generated. Four providers mentioned that they make use of the technology in this way as students are sent the recording of their performance as a link to watch their performance and feedback when they have an advocacy practice sessions/assessment. At one provider there are no more than five students in each oral skills session so that tutors can provide oral feedback for each student and students can have access to their recorded feedback also. By students being able to watch back their performances, and building feedback into the course, students are able to see where they are with the criteria/expectations to achieve and maintain high standards.

With the provision of technological resources, providers focus on ensuring the materials are interactive for students so that they are fully engaged with the course, and that the materials consider the different ways people learn. By providers reviewing their technology, they ensure it is current, practical to use and up to date to assist in students passing their assessments. One provider highlighted they do this by meeting with their technologies team that regularly feeds into team meetings to help the staff enhance/use the technology available.

Providers must also ensure this material is accessible and that everyone has an equal and effective opportunity to access the course materials. At one provider, VLE materials are given a score for accessibility and if something is not accessible, the provider makes changes. Staff use an inclusive digital toolkit to make sure things are accessible. At



another, there are training sessions available for students on how to use the online materials such as Westlaw and Lexis Nexis, and a dedicated accessibility learning support librarian who can support students who may have conditions that affect the way they read information on a screen. At another, to ensure students can access digital materials in a format that works best for them, they can use specific icons/symbols tied to the VLE on their phone.

To expose students to technology and media on the course, one provider also mentioned using films, podcasts and interactive practice questions in sessions. Another provider mentioned that they have a mobile app which serves as a platform for students to answer and engage with multiple choice questions uploaded by the faculty. This allows for students to build a quiz that touches on areas they struggle with. The mobile app is also an intelligent system and will give students more questions they tend not to do well on.

All providers give opportunities for mock assessments and timed answers in exam-like conditions. At one provider, when students re-sit any skills assessment, they are given an opportunity to re-sit it online, as they take into account that some international students may return home and travelling back to the jurisdiction can be burdensome for students.

One provider is looking into developing virtual court rooms – a 360-degree visualisation where students can see a barrister in a gown and look at them in the court room, which they hope will help with confidence building.

### *3.5. Mechanisms for students to give feedback*

It is apparent that all providers have a wide range of informal and formal channels in place for students to raise their concerns and to receive feedback including:

- One-to-one feedback through the academic faculty/drop-ins/availability in office hours
- Surveys
- Student representatives
- Ad-hoc focus groups
- Staff-student liaison committees
- Dedicated feedback email address
- Wider university complaints process

Providers undertake reviews to ensure course delivery meets standards. Adjustments are made internally to improve student experience, though major changes to course provision may not always occur.

One provider mentioned that students engage in self-reflection when given tutor and peer feedback, and students are also encouraged to listen to feedback given to other students. For instance, in the Opinion Writing/Legal Research module, students circulate their opinions for their peers to look at and give any feedback.

Tutors often pick up feedback informally from students in their classes or during one-to-one sessions. Providers emphasised that it is important that there is an open-door policy and that students are told that feedback is welcomed at any time.

Providers also spoke of linking students to a feedback survey or a module evaluation at the end of each session/class, so students can fill out the survey in class rather than be expected to do it out of the classroom. These surveys are anonymous, which allows students to be open and honest.

All providers spoke of there being student representatives for each cohort. Student representatives meet with the academic faculty termly and relay any feedback raised by their cohort. Students are encouraged to speak with their student representatives if they do not wish to raise the feedback informally with tutors. At staff-student liaison meetings, providers said that conclusions are drawn and from there things are actioned or students are given explanations as to why things are designed the way they are on the course.

In all, providers encourage their students to have a voice and they have noted this has increased over the years. Students know that any feedback they provide will be taken on board, which will benefit the next cohort, and the providers appear to actively listen to their students and do not ignore the feedback.

### 3.6. *Encouraging High Standards of performance and professionalism*

One provider spoke of only onboarding and admitting students who they think will go on to acquire pupillage and it starting from there. Other providers described that there is a strong message sent to students before the course begins, informing them that this is a professional course, and that the professional standards should be upheld. This is echoed in induction week and in the student meetings with their personal tutors, where an emphasis is placed on the course being the first year of a student's professional life and that students are heading towards the profession. The welcome talks therefore make clear the professional attitude expected on the course.

The Professional Competences are then key in encouraging a culture of high standards. Providers integrate these in the course and the written materials and try to link everything back to the profession and practice as a barrister. For example, where students are set deadlines, the provider will draw comparisons with court deadlines and that if students were given a deadline in practice and they missed the deadline, there would be consequences such as costs. Another provider spoke about treating the students as adults and allowing them to see the consequences of their actions and approach for themselves. Some providers have a terms and conditions and a legal agreement which sets out the student expectations. Students sign and agree to these terms when they accept a place at their universities. Generally, students on the Bar course are engaged and committed and therefore know the standards that they have to adhere to.

All providers inform their students, and the expectations are made clear at the beginning, that there is an attendance requirement and punctuality is imperative. Students are told they need to attend on time and attend the sessions fully prepared. At one provider, tutors have an engagement tracker which is key in monitoring the

students' engagement. For most providers, if students are more than ten minutes late to sessions they are marked as absent. With this requirement to attend sessions on time, there is also an emphasis on preparation and participation. Students need to be prepared for all sessions and should expect that they will be called upon to contribute in class. Most of the providers said that if students are not prepared and do not do the work, they are asked to leave and go to an alternative class and marked as not prepared/absent. At one provider, they have a 'phone-off' policy in sessions and full engagement requirement. By engaging in class, students are also informed that they must be respectful to one another other, which further links back to the Professional Statement.

Most providers spoke of treating the course as pre-pupillage and students being required to wear dark court-dress specifically for the oral skills assessments/seminars. Students are marked down if they are not dressed appropriately. One provider considered that they will not mark a student down if they do not wear formal wear as there could be some reason why the student did not, such as only having one suit and their suit being dirty, for example.

Three providers rely upon their wider university services when student conduct falls below the appropriate standards, and there are overarching policies and approaches and dedicated proctoring teams that support the law schools and give independent advice for more general accepted behaviours. The proctoring academic quality team at one provider can intercede and support and advise the faculty on how they can uphold policies. At another provider, there are escalation points and channels through which tutors can move to tackle poor behaviour.

Providers also mentioned that students are learning about professionalism through pro-bono activities, and when students are applying for legal opportunities like mini pupillages. Students are obtaining an understanding of professional written communication as well as the reality of the profession. Providers create opportunities for students to exchange contact with chambers and practitioners. For instance, some providers have different people from the profession, such as members of chambers, judges and clerks, who deliver talks and have Q&A sessions. Students are encouraged to go into a court room and for one provider this is made mandatory as part of their Professional Practice module.

Overall, providers spoke about education becoming a more complicated transaction as providers try to be proactive and one step ahead, but it is not always possible. The pressures of Covid-19 did not help the discourse with students and the last five years has become more difficult as mental health is an issue, but the universities must ensure they tackle poor behaviour and discipline students.

## **4. Progression**

### *4.1. Practice and employment opportunities for students*

Each provider referred either to having a dedicated careers service, team or members of staff responsible for providing careers support to students. The common extra-curricular activities available focus heavily around building students' advocacy

experience and preparing them for a career at the Bar. These include mock trials, mootings and court visits. Many of the providers hold careers days or events to allow for networking with local barristers or employers. It is common for students to be offered work experience by way of volunteering and pro bono opportunities. Several of the providers have tutors who are in practice, allowing students to speak with them directly about life at the Bar. One provider told us that they organise sports competitions between students and members of the local Bar in order to encourage networking.

It seems that the same opportunities are being made available to local and international students, with one provider highlighting that international students were advised to be careful to not breach the terms of their visas.

While students are largely keen to get involved with the extra-curricular activities, the main factor which appears to be affecting participation is trying to find the time around what is already a very demanding course. One provider timetables its extra-curricular activities and makes them a compulsory part of the course, whilst another arranges for these activities to count as “credits” towards the students’ total hours. It may be worth further exploring whether these good practice examples are helping to ensure that students are fully availing of the resources on offer without making compromises to their learning.

#### *4.2. Employability and transferability of provision*

As expected, the focus of careers services and advice at each provider is around helping students to secure a pupillage. Most told us that they offer assistance or dedicated workshops which cover CV writing, pupillage applications, organising mock pupillage interviews and appointments with careers advisors, barristers or other legal professionals. One provider has a dedicated Pupillage Advisory Service in addition to a general careers service. This is designed to assist students with every element of the pupillage process and is staffed with people who have been on pupillage committees and pupil supervisors. Another provider spoke about having barristers come in to give dedicated advice for students with a disability who want to apply for pupillage.

Providers talked about the skills being taught on the Bar course being inherently transferrable to other professions, such as those related to communication and writing. Many also take steps to ensure that they raise student awareness of how their skills can transfer to other quasi-legal or non-legal post-course destinations, encouraging them to explore alternatives should they either not succeed with, or not wish to pursue pupillage. These include career fairs which feature representatives or speakers from other legal professions, alternative employers’ fairs and apprenticeship schemes with varied employers. One provider also drew our attention to elements on some modes of their course which are non-legal and cover topics such as crime scene investigation.

Seven of the providers spoke about the importance of maintaining relationships with their alumni who have entered other professions. Having those individuals return to the provider to speak with current students or deliver careers talks or presentations can provide more realistic and practical examples of alternative career routes.

There was a lot of variation between the providers regarding the period for which careers services are still available to students once they have completed the course. This ranged from 18 months to 5 years. Some automatically extend students' access to these services, while others said the onus was on the student to request assistance if they needed ongoing support. This might be an area that the BSB may want to focus on at re-authorisation, for example by encouraging providers to make more of this provision available to students for longer periods of time.

#### 4.3. Post-course destinations

There are a small number of students who have already secured pupillage when they start the Bar course.

Two of the providers use graduate outcome surveys to monitor post-course destinations but said they can be quite unreliable. They are reliant on students remembering to complete the surveys, which when it comes to pupillage, becomes less likely with the more time it takes students to succeed in securing one. For the same reason, a further two of the providers mentioned having used surveys in the past but later choosing to remove them.

The remaining five providers told us that they encourage students to provide feedback about their post-course destinations but do not have a formal process in place. The consensus was that international students are more difficult to monitor as they are less likely to continue engaging with the provider after leaving.

Some tutors keep in touch with former students informally through LinkedIn or other platforms and events provided for alumni, or they learn about their careers anecdotally.

Two of the providers expressed the view that the BSB is best placed to provide pupillage data since pupillages are registered with the BSB and we should be able to share information with providers about how many students from the provider have obtained pupillage in any given year. The BSB does report this data, but the inference that providers do not know this may mean that this matter should be considered during the ongoing overhaul of the Bar training section of the BSB website.

## 5. Additional comments made

At all sessions, staff and students were asked if they had further comments to make under any topic. The following additional comments were made:

*“The university is very careful about advice they give and how they admit students. It’s not just a ‘yes you meet the requirements you can come in’ but they ensure this is what students can do and students know what they’re letting themselves in for. Bar students are better educated in what is expected of them coming onto the course compared to some of the other programmes”.*

The response from various providers indicates a proactive approach to support arrangements for students. This includes regular feedback mechanisms, such as staff-

student liaison committees, student experience officers, pro-bono activities and mid- and end of module feedback sessions. Furthermore, providers offer various resources for student well-being, including counselling services and a dedicated wellbeing module.

It was encouraging to see many of the providers use this time to speak about how the thematic review had provided them with an opportunity to champion their organisation's strengths and recognise the work their staff are putting into supporting their students' progress into their desired careers.

Comments to consider as additional good practice included:

*providers prompting and alerting students who they do not consider to be ready to take their assessment.*

*The use of certain metrics to identify attainment gaps, which are then addressed with targeted interventions.*

One provider expressed the following concerns:

- *The continuation of the BPTC assessments creating difficulties and being burdensome for staff within the providers.*
- *Students based at providers outside of London finding it difficult to attend mid-week Qualifying Sessions run by the Inns.*

With respect to the issues surrounding the continuance of the BPTC assessments, this is also creating additional costs for the BSB because of the ongoing delivery of separate assessments, so the Supervision team has started a discrete project examining the current status of BPTC students across providers with a view to better understanding why individual students are still in the system and placing a final date on completion of BPTC assessments. This situation does not affect centralised assessments, where transitional arrangements and cut-off dates were agreed as part of Future Bar Training reforms.

The Supervision team continues to work with the Council of the Inns of Court (COIC) and the Inns of Court in making Qualifying Sessions more flexible, both those held in person for students outside London and online. Over the past couple of years, this flexibility has been demonstrated, although there is still room for improvement. One issue impacting on this is the limitations placed upon the Inns in planning Qualifying Sessions sufficiently in advance to cater for demand. This difficulty is linked to the need for providers to provide enrolment data to the Inns earlier than they currently do. The BSB has been working closely with the Inns of Court and COIC to find more creative and contemporary ways of transferring this data and a pilot of a new system is in the planning stages.

## Annex 2: Detailed findings: the student perspective

### 1. Admissions

#### 1.1. Reason for applying to do the course

Students had a variety of reasons for choosing to study at their particular providers. These included the size of one provider and the fact there were different campuses at different locations, giving students the opportunity to study at a specific university in their own region.

Cost was also a factor for students, some saying they were offered a discount if they were undergraduates at the provider, some saying the fees were cheaper at their chosen provider compared to other providers. Some were in receipt of scholarships.

Others chose their provider because of its reputation, either in terms of staff working there who were prolific academic publishers or in terms of barristers they knew who had attended that particular university.

Students at one provider mentioned that the application process at their chosen provider was easier than at the others (this provider is one which has a relatively small cohort size and students told us they were attracted by the 'tight knit' feel). Conversely, one student initially applied to another provider but it all went through quickly and "too smoothly," so the student asked for their deposit back and chose instead a provider similar in size, however it appeared to be much more diverse in terms of the lecturing team and there was also a pro-bono opportunity.

Some mentioned they had completed the GDL there and, since it was a positive experience, decided to stay to do the Bar course. Word of mouth from previous students was also a factor. For example, one student mentioned that they had previously worked in a local law firm where they were impressed by the trainees from a particular provider that the student had chosen.

Other factors that determined student choice of provider included results statistics; an opportunity to study at the Inns; the availability of part-time study and, in one case, the extent of information on the provider's website, including living costs; knowing they would be joining a small cohort, making it feel like a personal process; and the availability of extra-curricular activities.

#### 1.2. Meeting the entry requirements

All students met the course entry requirements. Two students told us they did not get Recognition of Prior Learning, rather they were asked to produce reactivation of a stale qualification confirmation from the BSB, and also show evidence of work experience done.

One student said that their provider only accepted 2:1 degree classifications whereas another provider they knew of accepted 2:2s; the student did not like that, as when they

were doing the GDL, students with lower grades slowed the class down so they did not want to be around students at that level on the Bar course.

With respect to the requirement of English language fluency, students reported that if they did not have a UK undergraduate degree, they had to provide the IELTS certificate or Pearson's certificate. One student spoke of having a score of 9 in most parts of the IELTS but a score below 7.5 on one part and the provider was very stringent and told her she would need to pass that part too.

### *1.3. Application process*

All students we spoke with provided information about the application process that concurred with the information we were given by provider staff. In terms of those who attended a provider that combined a written and oral application process, students at one provider found the opportunity of undertaking an advocacy exercise and then having an opportunity to have a Q&A with tutors and previous students an excellent initiative. Students at the other provider told us they felt intimidated competing with students who had studied law for a few years prior to applying. One student mentioned that there was only 24 hours' notice of the interview, which was less than ideal given that they worked full time. However, students also said that guidance was issued in how to answer questions and a pre-interview talk was given which was a "nice touch." Students at the other providers found the process "hassle free."

Overall students found that applying for the Bar course was seamless and that help was available throughout either by Bar course staff or admissions staff. Students at one provider mentioned that Finance staff were unhelpful, described as "...a bit like gangsters and not friendly."

### *1.4. Prior knowledge of course*

Students reported that open days and networking events were really helpful in giving them pre-course information and some mentioned it was at these that they got to know about employability services. Other students told us they got to know a lot about the Bar course while they were doing undergraduate study at their provider. They said that they were prepared for the intense nature of the course and were warned they would have to "hit the ground running." Other students said that there was a lot of information to take in at once.

Students were told about pass rates and the competitive nature of pupillage and students were aware of BSB publications.

One student made a comment about the Bar in general not being considerate of those who are neurodiverse but that the neurodiversity team provided a wealth of support. Other comments were around the information that providers gave students which was not accurate, such as guidance around how much study time is involved and when results would be issued – this was a theme in most sessions with students and will be fed back to the providers in their individual reports.



### 1.5. Eligibility evidence

Across all providers, students' eligibility for a place on the course was checked as described by provider staff. Checks included appropriate qualifications – certificates and transcripts; settlement status – passport and visa details. One or two overseas students mentioned a lack of knowledge about particular immigration schemes and this caused anxiety as the situation was not sorted until a few days before the course was due to start. Another student gave an example of being born in England, but having a Portuguese passport, which took some time for staff to work through and understand.

## 2. Supporting students to meet their potential

### 2.1. Mode of study - part-time and full-time cohorts

Five providers offer only the full-time course. Four providers offer both full-time and part-time mode.

Generally, part-time students are integrated into the full-time course. A few part-time students feel a sense of isolation, but this is rectified by students using their own initiative and running social events outside the provider. There does seem to be an issue with timetabling for some part-time students. Some part-time students felt that being on the course for a longer period of time gives them an opportunity to build a better relationship with the staff, which is beneficial for their journey on the Bar course. However, part-time students at another provider felt that there was a lack of institutional support network, where individual feedback was not provided.

Some part-time students felt they were not fully informed at the start of the course that hard copies of course materials would not be provided. An international student at one provider applied under a disability allowance for hard copies but was denied on the ground that disability allowance does not cover international students. This will be followed up with the provider.

A student previously on the full-time course, is now on a part-time course and noted a significant difference between the two modes. The student felt the teaching standard was lower in classes being held at the weekend, both due to the teaching standard and the volume of subject matter being covered in a condensed period.

Given the nature of student feedback about part-time provision, this is an area that may warrant a thematic review to further test consistency of standards.

### 2.2. Support for students to help them succeed

The student responses reveal varied experiences regarding the support offered by providers to students on the Bar course. Many students appreciate the small tutorial groups and quick response to emails by tutors, assigned mentors and personal tutors, which foster a sense of community and personalised attention. Several highlight providers' accommodations of students' individual needs, such as childcare support, flexibility with attendance and considerations for reasonable adjustment plans. There are various support mechanisms such as feedback emails and questionnaires.

Some students find the support offered by providers lacking in clarity and accessibility. There is a preference for face-to-face communication, clearer guidelines, and easier access to support services. Students at two providers expressed concerns about inconsistency in feedback and support across tutors, indicating a need for standardised approaches. There were instances where students faced challenges in receiving appropriate support, with a lack of transparency and consistency in handling requests for reasonable adjustments. This included difficulties in obtaining personal learning plans and poor communication with invigilators. Students felt that the administration burden is immense at one provider with little help from the administrative team, with one of the main teams being outsourced to India, increasing students' frustration regarding contact hours availability. Students at this provider felt that more tailored support is required for the Bar course, as career support is geared towards undergraduates rather than supporting the specific needs of Bar students. Students at another provider were concerned about the impact of staff absences on tutorial cancellations, affecting students' learning experiences.

### *2.3. Communication of assessment arrangements*

Five providers had positive responses by students to the arrangement of assessments being communicated clearly and in a timely fashion. Several students expressed satisfaction with the clarity and timeliness of assessment communication. They mentioned receiving timetables during induction, with a particular provider providing a yearly planner to allow students to plan for assessments. Sessions were recorded regarding exam information, and students were provided with plenty of notice and clear information about assessments.

However, some students did not receive clear information about assessment location. They also mentioned difficulties in accessing documents on the virtual learning environment (VLE) and receiving revised timetables. Additionally, there were issues with students not being aware of the feedback function on the VLE. Some students highlighted concerns about the late release of assessment results, lack of confirmation emails for results, confusion about grade boundaries and separate marking system for Bar course and LLM courses. Students would prefer assessments to take place at midday rather than the morning, as some students have a long commute to the provider.

### *2.4. The student voice*

Students generally feel confident about providing feedback. Providers are proactive in asking for feedback and following up on it. Some specific feedback mechanisms are appreciated, such as mid/end module feedback forms and student representatives (with some representatives receiving training on how to deliver feedback). Personal issues are raised with personal tutors.

There is a lack of awareness or utilisation of certain feedback platforms. There are limited efforts to foster cohesion and networking among students within the cohort. Students also expressed issues with clarity and accessibility of course representatives. There have been instances of discomfort or discrimination within the learning environment, with uncertainty about how to address them effectively through feedback

mechanisms. Some students felt there were delays in implementing changes based on feedback, with changes often applied to the next cohort rather than the current one.

### 3. Maintaining standards

#### 3.1. *The Professional Statement Competences and the CAS.*

Most students were aware of what the Professional Statement Competences were after it was explained to them. Whilst some students were aware of what the Competences were by name, some only had a vague idea of what they were.

The Competences for some students were introduced to them at the beginning of the course during their induction week, with some students being explicitly told by tutors that the Competences were what they needed to achieve as training barristers and were integral to how they act/behaviour.

Students from five providers said the Competences were displayed to them at the beginning of each session/class and presented at the start of every student instruction/brief. Students from one provider described there being preamble integrated in their session objectives but them not knowing what it was. Students were also aware that each lesson/module related to the Competences and what the tutors were basing their teaching on. Not only are the Competences displayed for students but for some, the Competences are part of the students' required reading. However, students described there not being enough time to read all the reading materials provided, such as the Competences.

Most students stated that the Competences were linked on their VLE page. However, most students have not seen the overarching stand-alone document and instead it is conveyed to students weekly as and when it relates. Students from the provider where the Competences are displayed at the beginning of every lesson felt this was overlapped as their tutors take up time at the beginning of the class to read through each competency linked to the session, which students feel they know already since they see them daily, in lessons and on their VLE.

An example of good practice was identified by students who said they print off the document in the first week of the course during their induction so they can always refer to it.

When asked what they knew about the CAS, students largely had little knowledge and understanding of what this is. Students from four providers appeared to have a vague knowledge of the CAS, but the interviewer had to rely upon using response prompts. Students from one provider knew the CAS document was on their VLE, and from another, students received the CAS document at the beginning of the term and were introduced to it during their induction week. Students from a further provider highlighted that their day-to-day teaching set out the students' objectives which relate to the CAS, but these objectives did not specifically relate to the Competences.

Overall the BSB officers found themselves having to explain what the Professional Statement Competences and the CAS were and how they impacted the curriculum to

almost students at most visits, although students were vaguely aware of these documents.

### 3.2. *Preparing for assessment*

All students spoke of using their formative assessments to prepare for their summative assessments and how helpful they are, demonstrating the importance of mock assessments for students and the providers' understanding of this. By assessing students before their summative assessments, providers are ensuring students are developing to their full potential.

The BSB mock was highlighted as being similar to the BSB centralised assessment, which was helpful for students as it allows them to determine where the standard is, where they are against the standard, and whether they are completing the exam according to the prescribed time allocation.

Students from one provider found that their university-set assessments were more difficult than the actual assessments, however students found this helpful as they feel more prepared when they sit their summative assessments. Other students felt as though their mock assessments were based on material that they had already covered in previous sessions/classes which they did not find helpful.

All students highlighted that the formative assessments provide an opportunity to receive feedback from tutors, which they use to prepare for their summative assessments. Tailored feedback to individual students therefore seems imperative to support and develop the students' competences and enhance their capabilities. Most students described the feedback as being helpful and useful as it guides them on how to change their approach and strategy to help them improve, whilst other students felt the level of feedback was lacking and needed improving.

In addition, students spoke of the VLE being a useful tool to prepare for their assessments. Students from one provider shared that their online learning platform specifies which sections in the Blackstone Criminal Book and the White Book students need to learn weekly, which students use as a stencil for preparation. At another provider, students' online learning environment is sectioned and broken down into "prepare, apply, collaborate and consolidate," which is a useful system for students when preparing for assessments as it assists them in knowing what areas they have covered and what areas they need to focus on and study. Students spoke of using this to create a spreadsheet to identify what sections they have covered and what they need to work on for each module.

Outside of using formative assessments and the VLE to prepare for formal assessments, the following tools were also noted:

1. Note-taking
2. Practice questions/Spot-tests
3. Individual/Group Revision Sessions
4. Using the Professional Statement
5. Using the assessment papers as a guideline to determine how students will pass/fail

6. Using the Course Textbooks; White Book and Blackstone Criminal Practice book
7. BSB Handbook
8. BSB Syllabus

Students went into detail to describe how they prepare for the different assessments. Specific comments are set out below:

### Centralised assessments

Students described that it can be tedious preparing for the centralised assessments as there is a lot of reading, but predominately students use the BSB Syllabus and the practitioner textbooks to prepare. Some tutors from one provider go through revision questions for Civil and Criminal Litigation at the beginning of every session/class. The syllabus was described as thorough and helpful for students. Students at one provider described having spot-tests and students at another described that they have revision sessions for the centralised assessments in the style of a Q&A with their course provider.

### Advocacy

For oral skills assessments, students spoke of using their workshops to prepare, and their advocacy sessions being conducted as mocks before they break for the holidays to revise. For instance, at one provider students have two sessions dedicated to each individual advocacy skill assessment and then have two mocks before their main advocacy exams – an area of good practice.

### Drafting

Students at one provider told us that by week four on the course they know the basis of a draft and were given the opportunity to draft a statement of case during their formative assessment. This further supports the use of formative assessments being important and necessary for students to develop on the course.

### Professional Ethics

For Professional Ethics, students use the BSB Handbook to identify key information/words and make flashcards as this assessment is largely to do with mental recall. Students from one provider felt their formal Ethics assessment was much more difficult than their mock assessment, however as highlighted above, some students find it helpful when their formative assessments are more difficult. It can be suggested that formative and summative assessments should be of a similar difficulty level to avoid over-preparing or under-preparing students for formal assessments.

### Opinion Writing/Legal Research

To prepare for Opinion Writing/Legal Research (OPW/LR), students said it was repetitive practice that helped them, as this module was taught to students very quickly and they only had 5-6 sessions on it. Students from one provider submitted three pieces of OPW/LR work to be formally marked outside of their formative assessment. However, a pitfall for this module for students was that because it probably takes longer to mark,

students had not received their OPW/LR formative grades and feedback, even though they had submitted it some time before. This highlights again the value of feedback for the students and how they lean on it to aid them with their preparation.

Overall, students explained that preparation for formal assessments largely depended on which skills they were doing well in, what skills they wanted to focus on, and how much they had practised each skill. Students from one provider expressed that preparation starts at the beginning of the course from the first workshop, and since they are practising continuously in their sessions/classes they cannot “take their foot off the pedal,” which helps when they consolidate their learning making preparation a less difficult task. However, students described getting “tied up” with instructions, the syllabus, and trying to identify the important parts of their learning, which can be very time consuming. The learning curve, coming from an undergraduate degree to the Bar course, is steep and increases significantly from doing coursework in an undergraduate degree to having a lot of assessments on the Bar course. Some full-time students expressed that the last two weeks before their formal assessments involved them cramming information in and filling in the gaps as much as possible rather than revising. A full-time student from one provider further expressed feeling as though they sacrificed some modules that they believed they would pass to focus on revising other modules - a cause for concern. It has been suggested that a summary of the exact reading students need to consider should be given to them as part of their course materials.

Students highlighted some areas of good practice also. Students from one provider appreciated that their university put them in exam conditions for their formative assessments, which were invigilated in the classroom, as it prepared them for how the formal exam will be. Students also liked the way their university structured the assessments as it meant the exams were spread out making it more manageable and meaning students could focus on one or two modules at a time. Additionally, the availability of resit opportunities at one provider was highlighted as the best thing for students as it means there is no specific limit that students must pass assessments within. From a further provider, the university had two alumni students prepare a talk on exam tips for the Bar course cohort and how best to revise. Although this was a good thing that all providers could adopt, students felt the advice was generic and was not tailored to the Bar course. Instead, they felt the advice was good advice for undergraduate students.

### *3.3. Usefulness of formative assessments to prepare for summative assessments*

At the time of the focus groups, students had taken three to four mock assessments and told us they generally knew what to expect at summative assessment stage. For instance, students from some providers get actors for their advocacy assessments which they found good as the format for this mirrored what happened during their actual assessments. However, students also felt that there was a disparity in actors' approach; some actors were good, some were not. Other students said they expected the formative assessments to be structured differently. Students from one provider said that it would be helpful if the layout of the paper for the formative assessment is formatted in the same way as their actual assessments.

Yet, all students highlighted that there was some disparity in the difficulty level between formative and summative assessments - either their formative assessments were particularly challenging and more difficult than their summative assessments, or it was the other way around and their summative assessments were much harder.

At one provider, students were under the impression that the mocks were supposed to be harder than the actual exams, based on the idea that this can set students up in the right direction for accurate research and revision. For example, students described the formative assessment for OPW/LR was about scaffolding, so it was difficult for students to understand the terminology, but their actual assessment was about an injury at work, which students could better understand.

Students from one provider disagreed with the notion that mocks should be more difficult than their actual assessments, explaining that it does not motivate students as the feedback can be negative and discouraging, and therefore makes students start second-guessing themselves.

At another provider, students said that every tutor's method of giving feedback is different and may not be well suited for every student eg one tutor was quite abrasive and blunt, and it put the student off from asking for further feedback. At this same provider, a student said that for a formative assessment they received basic feedback and did not get anything of value, only two lines worth of feedback in comparison to other students who received in depth valuable feedback. Therefore, whether their formative assessments prepare them for their summative assessments can be said to depend on the quality of feedback students receive from the tutor and providers should be adopting a standardised approach to feedback for every subject that all tutors must adhere to.

Students who described their formative assessments as being less stressful said that they could take their answers with them into their formative assessments to correct themselves. We were unsure if this was formally pre-arranged, such as providing students with answers to the questions after them sitting the assessment and then allowing students to see whether they had correctly answered or not, or if the provider told students to bring materials into the assessment setting to assist with their answers. The BSB will follow this up with the provider individually. Whatever approach was used, however, made the final assessment a lot tougher than the mock assessment, although students expected it be on a similar difficulty level. At another provider, students described that their actual assessment was quite different to the mock as the questions were much harder and longer. Therefore, it is suggested that the baseline for mock assessments needs to be of the same level so that students can accurately know what to expect for their formal assessments.

Students felt as though the mocks for the centralised assessments were indicative of the summative assessments but requested that the BSB release an additional mock paper as it is easier to revise when there are more sample papers.

Some students identified that the same questions were used in their mini-mock exams and the formative exam. This was not helpful for them as it felt as though their formative

assessment was a memory recall test rather than an assessment preparing them for their summative assessment.

Overall, it seems that a number of factors affect whether a student feels that their formative assessment prepares them for their summative assessment. When students feel that the formative assessments do not prepare them, students do not know what to expect for the summative assessment, which can have an adverse effect as students will build an expectation of what the final assessment will be like and then find that it is not similar at all.

## 4. Progression

### 4.1. *Extracurricular opportunities*

The overwhelming response from students was positive, reflecting that they provide a realistic work environment with plenty of advocacy experience. There is a wide selection of extra-curricular activities on offer and being appropriately advertised. These include voluntary work, work placements, pro bono programmes, projects, mooting, mock trials, court visits, sessions with law firms and legal professionals.

Challenges arose in some areas, such as one of the providers where students are required to organise mooting themselves and they felt that the system can be disorganised. Work experience which is offered through the Inns as opposed to the provider can also be more difficult to access because often these are held during the week and students find it difficult to attend or take part in events that involve travel or may require that students miss lessons to leave early enough for the event.

The main issue in being able to avail of the opportunities was finding time outside of their study and qualifying sessions, especially for the full-time students. Some did not want to commit to certain programmes in case their attendance would be inconsistent. It was suggested that the timetabling of extra-curricular activities could be more flexible, with regards to days on which they were available, and the level of time commitment required. The students at one provider told us that “speed” mooting or mock trials could be useful in order to cut down on the level of preparation time.

Examples of good practice that we saw were where providers tailored the opportunities for students in such a way that made it feasible to do alongside their studies, and where time off was provided to those students who had secured mini pupillages.

### 4.2. *Support when applying for pupillage*

Many students spoke about the providers ensuring they were kept well informed about mini pupillage opportunities and either helping to facilitate those or providing some assistance with securing them.

There are teams or platforms at most of the providers for providing students with assistance on pupillage applications. This includes CV writing, mock interviews, guidance on navigating the Pupillage Gateway and dedicated guidance and materials about pupillage.



Access to support can be dependent on certain factors such as which tutors are approached for help, how quickly appointments are made with the relevant service or advisor and how proactive the students are. Students also told us that providers could be giving greater consideration to the timing of careers support. For example, ensuring that pupillage sessions are held in good time ahead of the Pupillage Gateway deadline.

Students at one provider complained that the pupillage support was limited, with talks being about the Bar generally rather than being pupillage specific. We will follow this up with the provider directly.

#### 4.3. Support when not applying for pupillage

The few students who told us they were not applying for pupillage said they were not doing so mainly because they did not intend to practise in the UK. Across the board, it seems that the support available for students considering alternative careers or completing pupillage overseas either is not available or limited. For international students, the challenge was that UK providers are not aware of the processes in their home countries.

#### 4.4. Transfer of learning to other careers/professions

Students told us that there are conversations and events at the providers relating to transferable skills which are gained during their course. However, these primarily appear to be general, with no real link made to any other regulatory bodies or alternative routes or professions.

At one of the providers, students who have been unsuccessful in gaining pupillage have the option to study SQE1 free of charge.

### 5. Additional comments made

Students at one provider said that there are recurring issues with staffing, such as bereavement leave for tutors and lack of backup coverage, leading to overcrowded seminars and frustration among students. This will be followed up directly with the provider. Some students expressed dissatisfaction with the teaching quality at some providers, mentioning a lack of support and feeling like they had to teach themselves, leading to burnout. Some students raised concerns about the effectiveness of feedback mechanisms and support systems indicating a desire for their feedback to be taken seriously and for better value of money.

Students from four providers did not have anything to add in relation to the support they receive.

*There were a few examples of good practice, such as, some providers offer timely access to wellbeing support services, including free counselling sessions demonstrating a proactive approach to students' welfare. Providing neurodiversity sessions and reasonable adjustments for students with ADHD shows inclusivity and accommodation for diverse learning needs. There are flexible meeting arrangements with personal tutors, including drop-in sessions which enhances accessibility and*

## ANNEX 3: GLOSSARY

Term	Description
Authorised Education and Training Organisation (AETO)	There are two types of AETO. One is a vocational Bar Training provider, the other is a pupillage training provider. This report focuses on vocational AETOs. These are organisations (typically universities) that provide vocational Bar training courses in England and Wales, authorised by the Bar Standards Board. We refer to them in this report as “providers”.
Authorisation Framework (AF)	The BSB’s <a href="#">Authorisation Framework</a> sets out the standards that organisations must meet in order to provide education and training for the Bar.
Bar Course Aptitude Test (BCAT)	<p>Tested aptitude for critical thinking and reasoning. The aim of the test was to ensure that those undertaking Bar training had the aptitude to succeed on the course.</p> <p>With the introduction of the new Bar Qualification Rules in 2019, and the new Authorisation Framework, which supports those rules, course providers are now required to have clear and robust admissions policies. These changes have proved to be much more effective than the BCAT at ensuring that training providers only admit students with the aptitude to succeed on a Bar training course. It was therefore abolished in July 2022.</p>
BSB	Bar Standards Board
Centralised assessments	These assessments are set, marked and quality assured by the BSB. They cover the following topics: Criminal and Civil Litigation.
Curriculum and Assessment Strategy (CAS)	The BSB’s <a href="#">Curriculum and Assessment Strategy</a> sets out the requirements for all three components of training for the Bar: academic, vocational, and pupillage/work-based learning. It sets out how each component of Bar training is mapped to the Professional Statement. Training providers must adhere to the Curriculum and Assessment Strategy to be authorised to deliver Bar training.
Council of the Inns of Court (COIC)	Founded by the Inns of Court, COIC works with them in strengthening the rule of law through excellence in professional and ethical education and in maintaining the highest standards of professional conduct.
External Examiners (EEs)	We appoint a number of External Examiners who provide us with specialist advice on the consistency of standards of the assessments set by the vocational component AETOs.

Term	Description
	<p>Our external examiners are responsible for confirming whether or not:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the assessment process measures student achievement rigorously and fairly in line with our Curriculum and Assessment Strategy; and</li> <li>• the standards and the achievements of students are consistent between AETOs.</li> </ul>
Formative assessment	A method of ongoing assessment used throughout a course to monitor learning and provide feedback.
Inns	The Inns of Court are professional membership associations for barristers in England and Wales that provide training, support, and resources for barristers and students.
Locally devised assessments	These assessments are set, marked and quality assured by the AETO. Further quality assurance is derived from external examiners, appointed by the BSB to approve assessments and marking and moderation. The locally devised assessments for the Bar course are: Advocacy, Conference Skills, Drafting, Opinion Writing and Legal Research, Professional Ethics.
Mini- pupillage	Short work experience placement that involves shadowing a barrister, possibly with the option of attending hearings in court.
Mooting	A mock trial-style exercise that involves students presenting legal arguments in front of a judge.
Pupillage Gateway	The Pupillage Gateway is a recruitment portal, managed by the Bar Council, that connects aspiring barristers with vacancies for pupillage.
Professional Statement (PS)	The BSB's <a href="#">Professional Statement</a> describes the knowledge, skills and attributes that all barristers should have on "day one" of practice. The various components of Bar training are designed to ensure that anyone who starts practising has proved that they meet the standards outlined in the Professional Statement and have therefore demonstrated they have all the necessary competences to be a barrister. The Professional Statement also helps AETOs understand what the outcomes of Bar training are and enables them to design programmes to meet the required standards for each component of training.
Provider	See AETO.

Term	Description
Qualifying Sessions	<p>Student members of the Inns are required to complete ten compulsory Qualifying Sessions, before being Called to the Bar covering the following themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethics, Standards and Values;</li> <li>• Advocacy Skills;</li> <li>• Legal Knowledge, Justice and the Rule of Law;</li> <li>• Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; and</li> <li>• Preparation for Pupillage, Career Development and Wellbeing.</li> </ul>
Reflective Reviews	<p>Annual retrospective self-assessment activity and reporting undertaken by AETOs and scrutinised by the BSB to satisfy ongoing monitoring activity by the Supervision team.</p>
SRA	<p>Solicitors Regulation Authority.</p>
Standards	<p>In the context of this report, standards can be considered met, maintained or raised. For standards to be met, we are assured that AETOs have implemented course delivery as required by our Authorisation Framework (AF); for standards to be maintained, we are assured by undertaking regular supervision activity that this is so; for standards to be raised, we have identified areas of good practice that will be shared amongst all AETOs. We may consider the latter as part of our next review of the Authorisation Framework.</p>
Summative assessment	<p>Assessment at the end of a course to measure a student's overall knowledge and skills.</p>