



Making sense of Bar training in 2020 and beyond

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If you are confused about Bar training, you have my sympathy. The new Bar training landscape offers many opportunities for students, but with change often comes confusion and I hope to provide clarity by answering those questions I have received from hundreds of Bar hopefuls over the last year or so. In essence, those questions amount to these:

- What has changed?
- What qualifications do I need?
- How do I choose which course to go on?
- How do I apply?

In the interests of full and frank disclosure, I should say from the outset that I am Head of Programmes at the Inns of Court College of Advocacy (ICCA) which has just introduced a new Bar Course commencing in September 2020. The ICCA is but one of a number of organisations offering Bar training and it is not my intention here to promote our course over others, but rather to provide information which will help you

Confused
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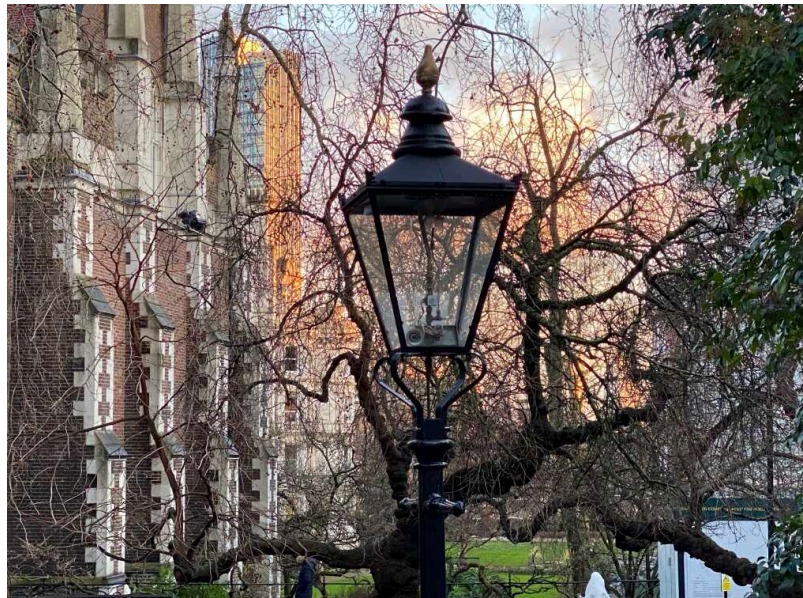
Your questions
answered.

make the best decisions to suit your individual circumstances.

What has changed?

The Bar Professional Training Course (BPTC) is no more. In its place comes a new approach following a long Future Bar Training consultation carried out by the Bar Standards Board (BSB).

The new approach heralds a training landscape devoid of much of the regulation imposed on the BPTC and is founded upon all educational providers satisfying the BSB that their courses meet 4 key criteria before they are authorised to accept students: Flexibility, Accessibility, Affordability and maintaining High Standards.



When course providers are authorised to run their courses, they are called Authorised Education and Training Organisations (AETOs) although I'm sure you'll forgive me if I still use the term 'providers' for ease of reading.

The BSB breaks Bar training down into 3 sections or 'components':

- The academic component (your undergraduate degree and, for non-law graduates, law conversion course);
- The vocational component (your Bar training course leading to Call to the Bar of England & Wales);

- The pupillage/work-based learning component (the final stage allowing you to gain a full practising certificate).

What is 'old' Bar training?

Traditionally Bar training courses (the 'vocational component' of training) ran from September to June over one academic year full-time or two years part-time. The cost was around £19,000 in London and £15,000+ outside London.

The BPTC was highly regulated. Providers were allocated a maximum number of places and had to abide by strict student attendance requirements, maximum class sizes and staff/student ratios. Success on the BPTC led to a pass classified as *Competent*, *Very Competent* or *Outstanding*. Passing the BPTC would then lead to Call to the Bar and, hopefully, to pupillage (referred to by the BSB as the 'pupillage/work-based learning component' of Bar training).

Applications to all Bar training providers were made through a central online applications portal called BarSAS which opened from mid-December through to mid-January and then again later in the year for clearing.



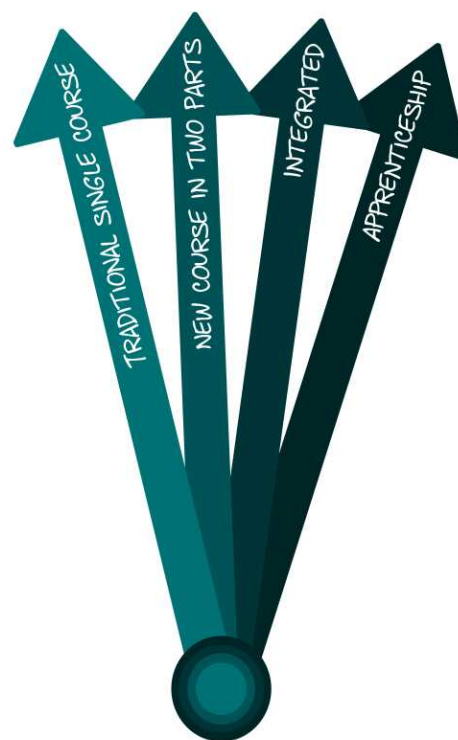
So what's new?

Under the new regime, gone are the regulations requiring student attendance, maximum class sizes, maximum student numbers and staff/student ratios. Gone are the requirements

for when Bar training courses must commence. Gone too is the central applications portal.

Provided the BSB are satisfied that the course fulfils the four requirements of flexibility, accessibility, affordability and high standards, providers are free to innovate, so for example courses can start at any time of the year, class sizes can be increased and teaching can be online, face-to-face or a blend of both. Applications for all courses are now made direct to the provider.

Now that the 'BPTC' name is no longer required, Bar training courses are now named individually – for example, BPP University has the Barrister Training Course (BTC), City University has Bar Vocational Studies (BVS), the University of Law has the Bar Practice Course (BPC) and the ICCA has the Bar Course.



New 'pathways' are now available, so some providers offer Bar training as a single course and others break it into two distinct parts, often focusing on the 'knowledge' subjects of civil and criminal litigation in one part and the skills subjects, such as advocacy, in the second part, although the precise content of each part is a matter for the individual course provider.

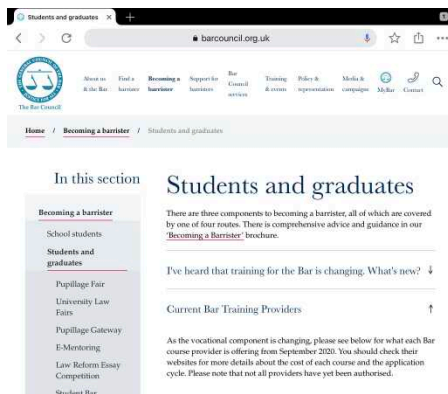
An 'integrated' pathway is also available, where students study both the academic and vocational stages on the same course. At the time of writing, only Northumbria University offers this integrated pathway. To be comprehensive, I should mention that an apprenticeship pathway could be available in the future, although this is not currently on offer.



Rather than grading Bar students into categories of *not competent, competent, very competent, or outstanding*, under the new BSB rules Bar training courses are now simply pass or fail, although providers can acknowledge your level of achievement by applying their own categories should they choose to do so.

Where can I find a full list of Bar course providers?

A full list of authorised providers (AETOs) offering the vocational stage of training is available on the BSB website. Further helpful information about Bar courses is available on the Bar Council website. You can then look at individual providers' websites for further detail.



What can I achieve by taking a Bar training course?

Whatever the name or pathway, all of these Bar training courses have the same common aim, to allow you to be called to the Bar of England & Wales and, should you choose to do so, commence the final pupillage/work-based learning stage of training for the Bar.

List of Bar Course providers (AETOs) available on BSB and Bar Council websites

What qualifications do I need?

By the time you enrol on a Bar training course, you must have:

1. Completed your 'academic component' within 5 years of starting your Bar training course (i.e. law degree minimum 2:2; or non-law degree minimum 2:2 plus passing a law conversion course such as the Graduate Diploma in Law). *Note that individual providers may require higher degree awards or GDL classifications;*
2. Passed the Bar Course Aptitude Test (BCAT);
3. The ability to exercise good English language skills;
4. Joined an Inn of Court (for courses in two parts you only need to join an Inn before commencing the second part).

The BSB sets the minimum entrance requirements for Bar training courses. Although providers must not go below these minimum requirements, they are free to impose higher

requirements. This is why individual providers may ask for higher degree awards or GDL classifications than those required by the BSB. Check their individual websites for details.

If you do not have a UK/Republic of Ireland degree, you must obtain what is known as a Certificate of Academic Standing from the BSB which verifies the equivalence of your degree or experience.

The BSB minimum requirements above are for *commencing* rather than *applying for* Bar training courses, so you are free to apply before you have completed your degree/GDL, taken your BCAT or joined an Inn.

What time limits apply?

You must commence your Bar training course within 5 years of completing your academic component.

This means that you must start your course within 5 years of 31st December of the year in which you received your law degree or, for non-law graduates, your GDL. The purpose of this is to ensure your legal knowledge is reasonably current. If you are out of time you can apply to the BSB to reactive your 'stale' qualification, or do a law conversion course to bring yourself up-to-date.

Where can I find more detail?

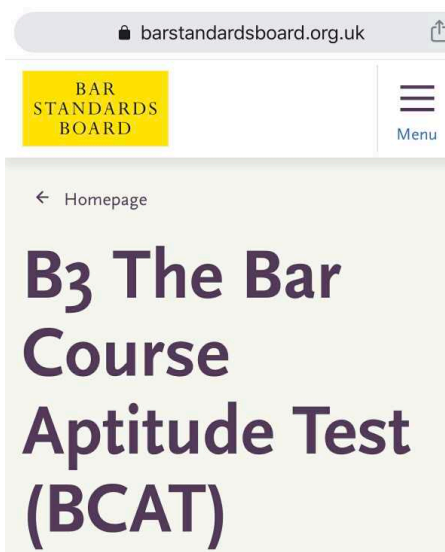
There are a number of detailed rules about Certificates of Academic Standing, the requirements for law degrees and law conversion courses and about applying for full or partial exemption from the GDL. You can find all of this and more in the Bar Qualification Manual on the BSB website.

What is the BCAT?

The BCAT is a 55-minute multiple-choice test designed to test aptitude for Bar training. Further information is available on the BSB website, including a free practice test. It has to be completed at an authorised test centre and there are numerous test centres overseas. Avoid leaving this to the last minute or you might find that all places are booked.



Detailed Rules - go to the Bar Qualification Manual available on BSB website



BCAT - further details available on BSB website

What are the English language requirements?

Good written and oral English language skills are vital for barristers. The BSB requirement is to demonstrate English language ability at least equivalent to a minimum score of 7.5 in each section of the IELTS academic test, or 73 in each part of the Pearson test of English (academic).

This does not mean you have to take such a test, but rather you can be called upon to do so if there is any doubt about your English language ability. It is up to each course provider how they verify that this requirement has been met. The ICCA, for example, assesses written skills throughout the application process and conducts and advocacy exercise with shortlisted applicants.



How do I join an Inn?

Applications to join an Inn are made through the individual websites of the Inner Temple, Middle Temple, Gray's Inn and Lincoln's Inn.

Which Inn you choose to join is a matter entirely for you. Each Inn has its own unique personality and atmosphere. Where possible, visit each of the Inns to discover this for

Choosing your course

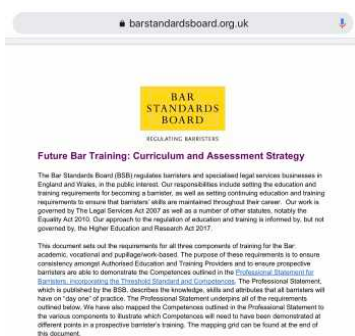
yourself. Each provides open days and numerous educational facilities for students.

The Inns provide scholarships to Bar and GDL students irrespective of where they choose to do their Bar training, so where you apply to take your course has no bearing whatsoever on your prospects of receiving a scholarship. You must apply to join an Inn at least 12 weeks before commencing your Bar training, although for courses in two parts you can commence the first part without joining an Inn. Joining early is recommended.

How do I choose which course to go on?

Just as the BSB sets minimum entrance requirements, it also sets minimum curriculum and assessment requirements (contained in the Curriculum and Assessment Strategy). This means that any Bar training course will include, as a minimum, the following modules:

- Civil Litigation and Alternative Dispute Resolution;
- Criminal Litigation, Evidence and Sentencing;
- Advocacy (submissions; examination-in-chief; cross-examination);
- Opinion Writing and Legal Research;
- Drafting;
- Conference skills;
- Professional Ethics (there is now an ethics course on your Bar training course and another during pupillage).



Curriculum and Assessment requirements are contained in the BSB Curriculum and Assessment Strategy



Discovering the differences between the courses on offer

All modules are mapped to the Professional Statement for Barristers, a document that sets out the knowledge, skills and attributes that barristers should have on 'day one' of practice (i.e. when they have achieved a Full Practising Certificate following pupillage).

Is it just me, or do all these courses look the same?

When you look at the bare bones of any Bar training course, you could be forgiven for thinking that they all look the same. This is because all providers must include the modules above, each of which must be assessed.

However, there are in fact many differences between courses, some obvious (e.g. location) and some which will take a little more time and research to reveal.

What are the differences between the courses on offer?

It will come as no surprise to lawyers that discovering the differences requires delving into the detail. The good news is, there are meant to be differences. From the variety of courses on offer you should be able to find one that suits you. I'll try to help with a few pointers:

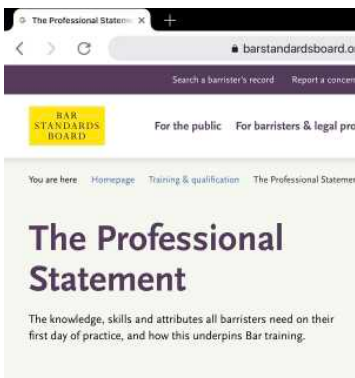
- **Location**

Some providers have multiple facilities in various parts of the country (e.g. BPP, University of Law); others are based in only one geographical area (e.g. Cardiff University, Nottingham Trent University, Northumbria, City, the ICCA).

If you are keen to stay in a particular area, then this should help you make your decision, or at least start your search. There is no requirement to map your Bar training location to where you wish to practise at the Bar. In areas where there are multiple providers, you have the benefit of comparing their precise locations.

- **Full-time/Part-time/Online**

In the 'old' days some providers offered full-time courses and some offered both full-time and part-time courses, all



The Professional Statement for Barristers sets out the knowledge, skills and attributes that barristers should have on 'day one' of practice

requiring attendance. Full-time and part-time courses like these are still available, but now some providers (such as City and the ICCA) offer online courses for the ‘knowledge’ subjects of civil litigation/ADR and criminal litigation and face-to-face teaching for the ‘skills’ subjects such as advocacy and drafting.

You can check with course providers how long you may choose to complete an online course in order to decide if it suits you. You may also choose to take a break from Bar training during a two-part course. Bear in mind that online courses may suit you initially in terms of flexibility, but when you start the ‘skills’ subjects you will have to attend face-to-face teaching sessions.

If you have work or caring commitments which are likely to last over the whole period of your Bar training, a weekend part-time course will probably be the best for you (e.g. such as from BPP University, City, the University of Law and Northumbria University). Bear in mind that geographical locations for part-time courses are more restricted than for full-time.

- **Attendance requirements**

Attendance requirements for teaching vary between providers. For example, are you expected to attend for two days a week, three or four? And for how many hours each day? Much of this will depend on how much time the provider devotes to private study, online learning and face-to-face teaching. You should be able to find answers to these questions on the websites of each provider, but if not feel free to ask them.

Bear in mind that there is a lot of information to take in when studying on the Bar Course, so a full-time course should really be treated like a full-time job. Precisely how your time is managed is influenced significantly by the nature of the course you choose.

- **Teaching approach**

Closely linked to attendance requirements is the approach taken to teaching the course. For example, online-only study of Civil/ADR and Criminal Litigation will suit independent learners. If your learning style is best suited to regular tutor

contact, keep this in mind when looking at the detail of the courses on offer.

- **Commencement and duration**

Many courses still follow the traditional route of September through to June, but there are also many other options on offer starting at various stages throughout the year and of various durations. Some providers offer a shorter full-time course over 6 months (e.g. Nottingham) and others have various commencement dates available.

The length of your course can also be affected by whether you choose to take additional modules and whether you choose to do an LLM Bar Course (of which there is more below). Some courses have the flexibility to allow you to work at your own pace.

- **Additional modules and activities**

Although providers must provide those modules referred to above, they are also free to offer additional modules (e.g. on areas of the law which the BSB do not require to be covered), enhanced modules (by providing teaching additional to that prescribed by the BSB) and activities (e.g. pro bono, careers events and so on) which they believe will improve their students' education and employability.

For this reason, the experience gained by students can differ significantly between providers and you may find that one course is far more suited to you than another.

- **Cost**

Bar Courses are expensive, but the good news is that prices have now tumbled across the board. There are a number of courses currently available for around £13,000. Affordability was a key criterion of authorisation to run a Bar course so this is a very positive change.

When you look at the headline cost of the course, check that it includes both the cost of textbooks (you cannot get by without these) and the BSB fee of £870 (all students must pay this wherever they choose to do their course).

Check how payments need to be made and when. If a payment plan would suit you then enquire if this is available. With two-part courses, you should be able to pay for each part separately.

When you do Bar training, you will have to factor in a number of additional expenses, including:

- Living accommodation (affected by location, length of course, attendance requirements);
- Travel expenses (affected by location, length of course, attendance requirements);
- Joining an Inn (before enrolment, or before Part 2 of a two-part course). £100-£110 one-off payment;
- The cost of 10 Inns' Qualifying Sessions. These act as a bridge to pupillage, providing you with the chance to meet practitioners and experts, gain knowledge and experience and improve your skills. Provided at an affordable cost to students. See Inns' websites for details;
- The cost of Call to the Bar. £75-£125;
- BCAT fee (before enrolment). £150 in UK/EU, £170 rest of world;
- Visa fees.

However worrying it may feel, take time out to calculate your costs. Once you know the true costs you can turn to sources of funding.

• Funding

Paying for Bar training is going to be an important issue for many students.

If you require a loan, you can seek this from a bank or other commercial organisation, or potentially from the government.

Government loans (currently of up to £10,906) are only available for Bar Courses that provide a Masters Degree (e.g. LLM). This is because Bar training courses in isolation carry insufficient credits for a Master's degree.

As such, many providers offer an LLM which encapsulates the Bar Course together with additional modules which attract sufficient credits to turn your Bar Course into an LLM, thereby enabling you to apply for a Master's loan. An LLM can cost more than a standalone Bar course, so check and factor this in when making your decision.

Individual providers may offer scholarships or fee reductions. These may be standalone scholarships which you need to apply for, or scholarships which you are automatically considered for as part of the application process.

A source of funding open to everyone (GDL and Bar students alike) are Inns' scholarships. The Inns provide over £5m each year in scholarships and are available to students irrespective of where they choose to do their GDL or Bar training.

At the time of writing, applications for Inns' scholarships need to be made well in advance, by the beginning of November the year before Bar training or by the beginning of May in the year of your GDL. Check the Inns' websites for details.

• Qualifications

Successful completion of any Bar Training course allows you to apply to be called to the Bar of England & Wales. The BSB will provide a transcript showing either a pass or fail. It will also reveal the modules you have taken and your number of assessment attempts.

You will also receive a postgraduate diploma (PGDip) from many course providers, either from the university providing the course (e.g. BPP University, Cardiff University, University of the West of England) or, where the provider is not a university in its own right, the university which acts as its validating body (e.g. King's College London for the ICCA).

Where you choose an LLM Bar course, this will be the qualification you receive. You will be eligible for call to the Bar just as you would be if you did a standalone Bar course.

Applying for your Bar training course

Remember that you do not need to have passed the BCAT, joined an Inn or achieved your degree award or GDL classification before you apply for Bar training.

How do I apply?

Applications for Bar vocational training now have to be made to each individual Bar training provider. The first stage is usually filling out an online form/questionnaire. You can find details of the application process adopted by each provider on their websites.

When should I apply?

You will usually apply a year or so before you intend to start your Bar training, but some providers accept applications closer to the commencement dates of their courses.

There are currently no agreed applications or offer dates between providers, so this is another area where you will have to do your research.

Remember that you do not need to have passed the BCAT, joined an Inn or achieved your degree award or GDL classification before you apply for Bar training. Offers made will be conditional on you meeting these requirements by the time of enrolment.

What is the application process?

Usually you will have to complete an online application form which not only checks that you have or expect to have the required qualifications by the time of enrolment, but also that you are a person that fulfils any additional criteria required by the provider. These criteria can differ between providers, but your motivation to become a barrister is an obvious example.

Some providers will require you to undergo an advocacy assessment, a written assessment, or an interview. Some require attendance for this, others may do this online, or by a combination of both. If yet another assessment sounds tough, remember that if you intend to go on to apply for pupillage you will face a similar process, so think of it as preparation and another vital component of your training.

The application process can differ considerably between providers. Try to look at providers' websites in at least the second year of your law degree or, for GDL students, the third year of your degree. Sign up for email updates and make a note of their entrance criteria.

Helping yourself

What can I do to help myself when I apply for Bar training?

There are a lot of things you can do now which will not only help you join the course you are most interested in, but will also help you into pupillage.

You do not need to have decided to become a barrister at the age of 3 to stand any chance of success, or to have honed your GCSEs or A-levels according to what you then considered would make you most suited for the Bar.

You can do your degree in the subject that you find most interesting. If that happens not to be law, that's fine - you can do a GDL (or equivalent law conversion course) to move on to a Bar training course. The Bar welcomes people from all backgrounds and is eager to promote diversity and equality of opportunity.

Some people decide to change careers to join the Bar, others know from an early age that this is exactly what they want to do. The collective wealth of knowledge, experience, ability and enthusiasm is just part of what makes the Bar such a vibrant and exciting profession to join.

Whatever your background, since in large part the Bar is about effective communication, it will always be helpful to gain experience in public speaking, whether in a legal context or not.

If you can gain work experience with barristers and solicitors, then do so. Any prospective chambers will welcome experience gained from both sides of the legal profession.

If you can give your time to help other people, then do so. Empathising and communicating with others, particularly those encountering real difficulties in their lives, not only helps them, but also demonstrates your human nature.

Take some time to think about your own life, the problems you have solved, the people you have helped, the obstacles you have overcome, the work you often do on a daily basis.

Life experience such as this falls naturally into many questions that may be asked of you when you apply for Bar training and then for pupillage.

What if I cannot find the answer?

As a final word of advice, if you cannot find the answer you are looking for on a provider's website, get in touch with them and ask the question. You are investing time and money into your training so making the right choice for you is important.

The great news is, there are now numerous options available to suit you.

Christopher Kessling
March 2020