

City firms plan to bring African lawyers to UK

A group of top City firms is behind a drive to give African lawyers work experience in the UK, a move hailed as a 'very important step' by the International Bar Association (IBA).

The initial goal of the programme – called International Lawyers for Africa – is to bring up to 20 qualified lawyers from African nations to the UK for three months next summer. The candidates will be chosen on a competitive basis from throughout the continent.

The visiting African lawyers will attend up to three high-level lectures and conferences every week, leaving at least two days a week to gain valuable experience in firms such as SJ Berwin, Herbert Smith, Clifford Chance and Olswang.

Timothy Taylor, head of international arbitration at SJ Berwin and a director of the project, said the bulk of the work experience would be in how international institutions work. But, he added: 'What people forget [is that] everyday office disciplines and the way that we project-manage things is a really valuable skillset. Because we work in law firms doing these things, we have forgotten that that's something we've learned.'

Mr Taylor said it is intended that every country in Africa should at some point be represented and that, if 20 visitors come to the UK, they should represent 20 nations.

IBA executive director Mark Ellis welcomed the initiative. 'I'm a firm believer in furthering the education of lawyers, whether they're in developing countries or not. It's a two-way street – it not only gives the young lawyer a tremendous experience and insight, but it's also good for the firms that are mentoring. I also believe very firmly that the legal profession has the responsibility to initiate these programmes.'

Though the spectre of brain drain looms when offering foreign work experience, Mr Taylor said that checks and balances would be built into the set-up in an attempt to prevent this. One major block will be a condition that firms will not be able to employ their visitor for five years.

Rupert White

GRADING: six course aspects reviewed, with fewer ratings Providers of legal practice course to earn new marks

The first results of a new, more detailed grading system for providers of the legal practice course (LPC) were unveiled this week.

Cardiff Law School, the University of Westminster and Manchester Metropolitan University all achieved the top grade in all areas of assessment.

Under the revised system, the Law Society is grading providers on six separate aspects of their course, rather than giving just a single grade for the course as a whole. The components assessed are: teaching, learning and the curriculum; assessment; students and their support; learning resources; leadership and management; and quality assurance and enhancement. Assessors provide a paragraph of comment on each area, highlighting particular strengths or weaknesses and any issues the provider needs to work on.

Under the new scheme, the previous five levels of rating – topped by an 'excellent' rating – have been condensed into three: 'commendable practice', 'confidence in provision', and 'failure to meet the required level of provision'.

Byron Jones, LPC course leader at Cardiff Law School, which had achieved the 'excellent' grade for the past eight years running under the



Students: more sophisticated

previous scheme, said: 'The excellent grade did provide a useful label, but we do not perceive it as a problem [that the rating has been dropped]. There are potentially great benefits [to the new scheme], because it gives students and firms more information and it makes things more transparent. But students will need to be more sophisticated in how they look at the results.'

Law Society head of education and training Julie Swan said: 'We set up a working party to look at the monitoring regime. One issue was that one grade does not necessarily fit the course – it could be good in one area, but not in another. We needed to give more information to the students and the profession.'

Fifteen providers will be assessed under the new system this year.

Rachel Rothwell

Specialist climbdown

The Legal Services Commission (LSC) has performed a U-turn over its decision to ditch its specialist support scheme.

Not-for-profit bodies initiated judicial review proceedings earlier this year after the LSC announced plans to abandon the popular scheme, which provides back-up support for legal aid advice providers over the phone and through training (see [2006] *Gazette*, 23 February, 1). They said there had been insufficient consultation to end the project. The Law Society said it was planning to intervene in support, while MPs also condemned the LSC.

An LSC spokesman said it had changed its mind and would pay the

costs of the claimants, which included the Child Poverty Action Group and mental health charity Mind. 'We regret the disruption our decision to terminate the specialist support service has caused the providers,' he said, but added that it could still be stopped following future consultation.

Kevin Martin, Law Society President, said the LSC should wait until Lord Carter reports on his proposals for improving civil legal aid.

'The removal of this vital service would leave clients abandoned in rural areas where there are already acute shortages of advisers,' he added. 'This is another example of a knee-jerk legal aid policy decision.'

Paula Rohan

● CONDUCT PAIR

Regional law firm Blake Laphorn Linnell and Yorkshire firm Gordons were appointed to the legal panel for the Law Society's conduct assessment and investigation unit this month, following a tendering process. The two firms will share the unit's routine conduct investigation work between them, under close supervision from the Society. The conduct assessment and investigation unit handles complaints about solicitors' misconduct, and received around 4,500 complaints last year.

● OBTAINING REDRESS

The NHS Redress Bill could substantially increase the number of clinical negligence claims, MPs warned this week. Under the proposed legislation, people who sustain injuries while undergoing treatment could make claims for up to £25,000, with the government picking up the bill for legal costs and medical reports. In a report issued this week, the constitutional affairs select committee said the Department of Health was unable to quantify the number of potential new claimants under the scheme, although it has accepted that there could be up to 19,500 extra claims each year. The committee also said the department had neither identified the independent practitioners who would administer the scheme, nor the rates it would pay medical experts and lawyers.

● PATIENTS IN MIND

The Law Society has hailed the government's decision to drop its Mental Health Bill, which would have allowed for the detention of people with untreatable personality disorders even if they had not committed a crime. President Kevin Martin said: 'The Law Society has campaigned forcefully against this Bill because it would have had a damaging impact on the care and treatment of people with mental health problems. The Bill was too heavily focused on compulsion and did not do enough to address patients' rights and their treatment.' The Society called on the government, which plans to amend existing laws instead, to devise a fresh approach with full consultation.