

Outrage over student dress code is storm in a teacup

Catherine Calder

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Students at BPP University Law School in London were given a strict dress codeALAMY

Boots with short skirts, open-toed shoes and colourful socks are just three of the items vetoed in [a handbook for trainee barristers](#) that was seized upon by the media recently.

The rules at BPP University Law School in London go some way beyond the guidance provided by the Bar Council, which sets out two options: court dress (“wigs, gowns, wing collars and bands or collarettes”) or business suits (“dark-coloured, formal”). Unlike the BPP handbook, which stipulates that a man’s suit should ideally be double-breasted or three-piece, the Bar Council makes no specification as to cut.

As Brian Barker, QC, a former Recorder of London who is now involved with charring inquests and inquiries, says: “A tidy argument is generally improved by a tidy presenter.” Of course, a barrister must always act in accordance with the core duties to the court and to the client. Most would agree these duties encompass an obligation to avoid attire that may detract from the legal process or incur a judge’s displeasure to their client’s detriment.

On this basis you could charitably argue that BPP was simply heavy-handed in its attempt to unravel the unwritten, unspoken rules for the benefit of its students. Coral Hill, head of external relations at the University of Law, said that clothing did not form part of its assessment, as it does at BPP, but added: “We always tell students to come dressed for court. At this stage in their studies, most know what is appropriate, but it’s sometimes necessary to make clear to younger students just how sober court clothing is.”

Perhaps BPP did not need to specify that “shirts should be predominantly done UP” (their capital letters) and certainly terminology such as “kinky boots” (their inverted commas) was a gift to the tabloid press, predictably leading to headlines such as the *Daily Mail’s* “Cover your briefs, girls”.

But officious as BPP’s guidelines may be, they do not focus unfairly on women. My 16-year-old daughter was unimpressed that students were penalised for short skirts — no mention of tight trousers for men, she noted — but the rules are arguably harsher for male students: there’s a stricture against men showing their shirt over the stomach, for example. Nor do they have potential for physical discomfort, unlike the 2in-4in heels that [Nicola Thorp](#), a receptionist, was told to wear at PwC in 2016. When she refused she was sent home from her temporary job without pay.

There is no dress code at Serjeants’ Inn. Our tenants are well aware that a court hearing is not the time to express their sartorial individuality, although Bridget Dolan, QC, admits to appearing in the High Court in rose-patterned Dr Martens on a snowy day. The judge did not take umbrage.

And perhaps we should focus on the positive rather than the negative. The First Hundred Years project run by Spark 21 celebrates the achievements of role models from Dame Rose Heilbron to Baroness Hale and campaigned for the installation of the statue of [Millicent Fawcett](#) unveiled last week in Parliament Square — the first female statue among 11 of men.

In this light the BPP furore is a storm in a teacup. It is a distraction, on the one hand, from genuine instances of sexist attitudes and abuse of power at the Bar and on the other, from the fact that as we approach the centenary of the legislation permitting women to join the profession, successful female barristers are fast becoming the rule rather than the exception. **Catherine Calder is joint chief executive of Serjeants’ Inn Chambers, which is a founding partner of the First 100 Years campaign. She is also a trustee of the charity Spark 21**