



## Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Belfast Bible College, March 2023

### Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that the Belfast Bible College (the College) is making acceptable progress since the [March 2022 annual monitoring report](#).

### Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 A new principal was appointed in March 2022, and took up post in June 2022. An external organisational review of the college was instigated by the new Principal in January 2023, with the aim of examining all aspects of the College, including future direction and financial viability, in order to create an effective community of continuous learning. In September 2022, the College launched a new qualification - the Graduate Certificate - which enables students with a previous degree to access a Level 6 qualification in Theology by attending college for one day a week and an intensive study week in January. A new development is the creation of a Postgraduate Student Committee for Level 7 postgraduate students which informs the Postgraduate Programme Leader and feeds into the open meetings of the Education Committee.

### Findings from the monitoring visit

3 The annual monitoring review was undertaken using desk-based analysis, followed by an online review visit. The desk-based analysis included scrutiny of documentation including collaboration processes with the University of Cumbria (UoC); external examiner reports; minutes of strategic and operational meetings; data and information on attendance, retention and achievement; annual monitoring and review; and student voice. During the review visit, the team met with the Principal and senior staff, academic and support staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students.

4 The organisational review is due to report in June 2023. The College produced an action plan following the Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER(AP)) in March 2021. This was approved by the Senior Management Team in October 2021 and reviewed and updated in October 2022. This was initially followed up in the monitoring visit of March 2022, but has subsequently been reviewed further. A number of actions have been completed, some remain ongoing during the current review year of March 2022-23, and others have become embedded into the annual quality cycle.

5 The College's current five-year Strategic Plan runs from 2021 to 2026. The Strategic Plan and the associated Annual Implementation Plan are approved and monitored by the Board. The College has continued its work on developing a more systematic approach to the development of the College's strategic plan, aligned with sectoral good practice. Ongoing reviews and detailed implementation plans are scheduled to continue until October 2025. The overall review of this process has been included in the organisational review, which is currently underway, and will be monitored by the Board. In tandem with the organisational review, the Principal has created six Honorary Fellows under a new Fellowship scheme. Part of their remit is to advise on horizon scanning and current trends in

relation to revision of the five-year strategic plan. All actions arising will feed into the next Annual Implementation Plan.

6 The HER(AP) of March 2021 identified two areas of good practice. The College has continued to develop its system of student engagement. The formal mechanisms of end-of-module feedback forms, year-end surveys, student representation, staff-student committees and attendance at open meetings of the main Education Committee remain. Students are also consulted about new programme developments and proposed changes to existing ones. One new development is the creation of the Postgraduate Student Committee for Level 7 students, which also feeds into the open meetings of the Education Committee. Postgraduate students are mainly working remotely, so appreciated the establishment of the new committee. Reviews will be drawn into annual cycle of reviews during the autumn semester.

7 The College is very conscious of the need to provide full and timely feedback to students on matters raised, and of the necessity to raise awareness still further of the actions it has taken. Recent surveys have indicated that student awareness could be improved. This has resulted in an ongoing action. The College continues to evaluate the impact of the various formal student voice mechanisms through the Education Committee. An annual review is now embedded in the annual quality cycle.

8 Students met by the team considered that they were given many opportunities to feed back to the College, and to raise any issues either through open forums or through student representatives. Students met by the team were complimentary about the online training package provided for student representatives - both undergraduate and postgraduate - and particularly noted the usefulness of the quiz at the end of the training pack slides that were provided.

9 The College aims to support its students to achieve beyond the threshold level. Although students were unfamiliar with the term 'threshold level', they quickly identified ways in which programme, assessment and other documentation clearly set out expected levels of achievement. They were also able to identify additional ways in which they were assisted to achieve at higher levels, including by class discussion, constructive feedback, access to additional resources on the virtual learning environment and good library resources. Staff stressed that the way in which the programmes had been developed to promote scaffolded learning and skills acquisition, along with additional study skills provision and considered feedback and feedforward. External examiner reports support this. Some study skills support materials were accessed through the University. Well-planned placements, within Northern Ireland, the rest of the UK and internationally, allow undergraduate students to extend their specialist areas of interest. At master's level, online components include formative feedback on drafts, essay plans and essay structure. The dissertation module is preceded by a skills for dissertation module which includes formative and summative assessments and feedback.

10 The College operates a personal tutor scheme, and students meet with tutors at least termly. Most students felt well supported, but a minority questioned the usefulness of the scheme. Disability support is provided for students, and signposting to mental health support is included within this. In addition, an external company has provided mental health training sessions for students. The College is actively trying to monitor and assess external and internal factors, and trends for low undergraduate attendance and engagement observable since the post-pandemic and return to face-to-face learning. This trend has also affected other non-assessed courses such as Ministry Passport; however, the College is aware that other providers are navigating a similar phenomenon. The College has a robust set of policies to guide them in monitoring and reviewing issues with student attendance and engagement, and identifying students who are at risk. These include Attendance Mitigating

factors, Non-Engagement Procedure, Student At Risk Procedure, Attendance Monitoring Procedure, and At Risk and Non-Engagement Monitoring template. The matter has been discussed in both staff and student consultative and working groups. As an attempt at promoting attendance, the College has issued students with an email advising them that low attendance may influence any reference they may request in the future.

11 The HER(AP) report in March 2021 noted the partnership as being good practice, particularly with respect to the development and approval of a new MA Theology programme. The collaborative partnership with the University of Cumbria continues to be effective. The collaborative partnership between the College and the University is underpinned by a robust set of documentation which outlines clearly the responsibilities of both parties. The running of partnership programmes with the University was reviewed in June 2022, and will be reviewed again in June 2023. The partnership is working towards the launch of the revalidated MA Theology programme in September 2024, with a focus on innovative approaches to content, teaching and learning methods integrated within this. There remains good personal contact and communication between both parties. Effective lines of communication are an area which is monitored and evaluated by the University. The Head of Collaborative Provision from the University attended the College's graduation celebration in November 2022.

12 The University offers a number of online continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities including training for dissertation supervisors and connections to UoC lecturers being involved in work placements. The College holds an annual teaching and learning festival, from which some staff at the College have benefitted. Academic staff were also involved in theology networks. IT staff engaged with commercial providers for updating of resources and other support staff undertook training in safeguarding and mental health. However, the percentage of staff taking up pedagogic development opportunities, on a regular and systematic basis, either through the University or external organisations like Advance HE, remains relatively low. The College is exploring ways to improve this for the Organisational Review in 2023. This had been noted in the reviewed Action Plan in October 2022 with respect to the development of the new MA degree, and with a target completion date of September 2024. CPD for all staff is handled through line-management and discussed at the annual appraisal. In addition, the Education Committee includes discussions of an area for staff development for the lecturing staff. An area of common interest for training is identified each year, generally planned for May/June and then reviewed. However, nothing is noted in a college action plan for the systematic CPD and pedagogic updating of all teaching staff, and an annual programme of appropriate updating for support staff. Teaching staff regularly share best practice, both informally and more formal minuted sessions. They also engage in peer reviews and research forums.

13 The College's annual monitoring process follows the requirements set by the University of Cumbria. Reports at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels are submitted to the University, and these are also used within the College's monitoring system. Internally, module evaluation reports are completed for each module, and these include a summary of feedback from students. These sources of data and information complement the monitoring documentation produced for the University. Annual monitoring within the College is overseen by the Education Committee.

14 Student retention rates at the College are 93.9% across all the validated programmes. This is above average for the validating university and illustrates the high quality of support offered by the College. Withdrawals and intercalations are monitored on a regular basis with support for students as needed by personal tutors, advisers of studies and pastoral care. Completion rates also remain high. Student achievement was strong over the past year with 53% of students achieving a 2.1 or 1st in the undergraduate programme and

improved rates of performance in the MA with one sixth of the graduating cohort achieving a Distinction.

## **Progress in working with the external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education**

15 The revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) and *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications* (FHEQ) are the primary external reference points against which the College manages and monitors its higher education provision. All internal policies are aligned with the Quality Code, and monitored by the Education Committee. The College aligns its academic programmes against the QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Theology and Religious Studies. The College's Placement Handbook is also aligned to the Quality Code.

16 In the Annual Monitoring Return Form 2023, the College stated that it refers to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. However, on further enquiry, the College noted that it has not yet specifically aligned its provision to this external reference point.

17 The College signs an Institution Agreement with the University of Cumbria and enters into Programme Agreements which are annexes to the main agreement. The Programme Agreements specify the requirements of the two parties for the delivery of validated awards. All college programmes linked to the University of Cumbria are subject to the University's validation procedures, including the production of programme specifications. The College aligns to the policies and processes of the University of Cumbria, as specified in the collaboration and programme agreements. In turn, the University itself aligns closely with the requirements of the Quality Code. The College also refers to the University of Cumbria as a reference point for matters such as retention and attendance.

18 UoC employs external examiners at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. External examiners attest the standards of student achievement and marking. External examiners produce an annual report and attend examination boards, but are not required to meet students or staff. All recommendations made by external examiners are followed through in the annual monitoring and collaborative provision review processes. Recent reports have commended the scope and standard of written feedback provided for students.

19 The Principal is a member of the Association of Bible College Principals, which acts as a mechanism for exchange of ideas and informal benchmarking. Tension between academic study and training for the ministry is set out in the Ministry Passport which also references comparisons with other providers. The College also engages with a large number of external bodies to ensure the health and wellbeing of its students, staff and premises, as required by law in Northern Ireland. These include the certification of accommodation by the Northern Ireland Tourist Office, ANUK National Code of Standards for larger student residential developments, and environmental health requirements. The College is also subject to UKVI compliance.

## **Background to the monitoring visit**

20 The monitoring visit serves as a short check on the provider's continuing management of academic standards and quality of provision. It focuses on progress since the previous review. In addition, it provides an opportunity for QAA to advise the provider of any matters that have the potential to be of particular interest in the next monitoring visit or review.

21 The monitoring visit was carried out by Dr Helen Corkill, Reviewer, and Millard Parkinson, QAA Officer, on 16 March 2023.

**QAA2753 - R13475 - Apr 23**

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2023  
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB  
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel 01452 557000  
Web [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)