



# Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Belfast Bible College, March 2024

## Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return, the supporting documentation and the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that Belfast Bible College (the College) is making acceptable progress since the [March 2023 monitoring visit](#).

## Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 The College has 63 students (headcount) enrolled for the academic year 2023-24. This compares with 89 in the previous academic year. This is reflective of the position of the subject provision in the UK higher education sector over a number of years. Undergraduate students show a preference for the full-time route with only 15% following part-time modes. The 18 postgraduate students are entirely part-time. The College's awarding university partner - the University of Cumbria - is unchanged. Since the last monitoring visit in March 2023, three members of the teaching staff have left the College. Given the small number of overall staff, this represents a significant percentage and was duly reported to QAA. The staffing changes coincided with a planned operational review (OR), which presented the opportunity for the College to think longer term with regard to staffing. The existing Master of Arts (MA) Theology is being discontinued and replaced by a new MA Practical Theology which will be delivered online. The College continues to offer a BA (Hons) Theology and a Higher Education Certificate Theology.

## 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 a wide range of documentation submitted by the College, some of which were in response to requests for further evidence. During the visit, the team met with the Principal and senior staff, academic staff and support staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students. The team concluded that the College has taken effective measures to ensure that students continue to have effective teaching and support during a period of change and have taken care to plan for the future which will include increased online delivery (paragraphs 4-5). The team found that the College's data return and associated documentation indicates that student recruitment remains broadly static, while retention, completion and achievement rates remain at a level comparable to, or higher than, that of the accrediting body (paragraph 6). The College continues to build on the outcome of the previous Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER (AP)) and subsequent monitoring, and works closely with the awarding body - the University of Cumbria - to ensure students have appropriate support and facilities to enable them to achieve programme outcomes (paragraphs 7-13). The team also concluded that the College continues to make appropriate use of external reference points in setting and maintaining the quality and standards of its academic provision and maintaining relevant Core and Common practices of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (paragraphs 14-16).

4 An interim Education and Academic Programmes Manager (0.4 FTE) took up post in July 2023. A new post of Head of Education was advertised and has been filled from August 2024. The new Head is qualified at doctoral level and an experienced educator and pastor. A Senior Fellow (0.4 FTE) and a Pastoral Care Co-ordinator (0.5 FTE) took up posts in September 2023. During this period of change, four new Associate Lecturers have provided additional teaching support at modular level. Three are qualified to doctoral level; one to master's level. Associate Lecturers now play a fuller role beyond core teaching. Senior staff explained how these Associate Lecturers support student learning and this was confirmed by students. New Honorary fellows provide further support in planning and delivery, particularly as related to the core mission of the College. The College is seeking to appoint to a post focused on e-learning. The College's Education Staffing Plan 2024-2025 sets out a 'hybrid' staffing model going forward. It includes a new full-time post in Practical Theology to support the new MA. Students confirmed that changes in staffing had required them to adjust to new teaching styles in some cases. However, they were clear that the quality of teaching had remained high throughout the course.

5 The findings of an Operational Review (OR), conducted by an external consultant, were reported to College Board in June 2023. There were several recommendations, including the creation of a revised senior leadership team. This team comprises the Principal, Head of Education and Operations Manager, and is now substantially in place. A strategic planning group, led by the Principal, is charged with taking forward the OR recommendations in the broader context of current challenges that the College faces. The strategic planning group reported to the Board in January 2024. This included a proposed change of name and the development of a full business plan in a timescale of 8-10 weeks. While some elements of the OR are yet to be taken forward, the team concluded that the College is actively engaged in strategic development designed to serve the College and its stakeholders into the future.

6 Overall retention at the College has remained high at 95.65%. Since the last monitoring report, 69% of those completing undergraduate studies achieved either a 1st or 2.1; 12% completed with an ordinary degree which was noticeably higher than in the previous years. Staff were aware of this and did not anticipate that this sudden rise in the award of ordinary degrees would continue beyond this year. There were no cases of an MA student withdrawing from the course without an award, and only one where the student opted for a PGDip. While there were no distinctions, 83% of those completing studies during the period since the last Annual Monitoring Report did so at merit level.

7 The HER (AP) review of March 2021 highlighted two areas of good practice - student engagement and partnerships. Student engagement continues to be central to ongoing review and development of academic provision. Mechanisms include Postgraduate (PG) Student Committee, module feedback, the staff-student consultative group and student attendance at Education Committee. The PG Student Committee has now become operational, reporting to Education Committee. For example, three specific PG-related matters were discussed at the meeting of 23 November 2023. A new PG student was fully aware of the Committee and its purpose. Students spoke positively with regard to a range of other opportunities they had to feed back to the College and gave examples of where such feedback had resulted in changes. For example, in one case a lecturer had arranged an additional session to clarify an assignment briefing. Students also confirmed that module feedback forms are used consistently and that they felt that the College took this feedback seriously. Students reported that open forums were also used to gain student views and that, given the nature and size of the College, there were many informal ways to bring matters of concern to the relevant staff member.

8 The College's Action Plan - produced following the HER (AP) review in March 2021, approved by the Senior Management Team in 2021 and reviewed and updated in 2022 -

indicates the completion of a number of actions since the previous monitoring visit. These include the development of clearly structured, regular communications with the University of Cumbria. Some further actions, which have been more recently included in the plan, are yet to be completed. The College's five-year Strategic Plan (2021-26) sets out a vision for the College's overall profile and development. Progress relative to the broad objectives set out in the Plan is monitored by the Board, principally through an Annual Implementation Plan (AIP). The team viewed the AIP included in the evidence and noted that it is a comprehensive document relating principally to 2021-22. Senior leaders explained that a new streamlined, traffic-light reporting system had been put in place and that this new method of reporting would be presented to the Board in June 2024.

9 The College has an ongoing Institutional Agreement with the University of Cumbria and continues to work closely with the University. Programme Agreements, which are annexes to the main agreement, underpin the individual courses of study. This includes agreed programme specifications. The College aligns its provision to the policies and procedures of the University and utilises university documentation as appropriate - for example, in specifying level-specific grade descriptors. The partnership with the University of Cumbria continues to be effective and collaborative. One example of this is the development of the new MA in Practical Theology. A further example is the 'live' Annual Monitoring Report, which enables both the College and the University to monitor progress on an ongoing basis. A third example is the regular contact that is kept between the College and the University of Cumbria. The new Associate Lecturers have also been approved by the University. There is evidence that the College follows the University's procedures on an ongoing basis - for example, in making minor modifications to existing provision.

10 The College is continuing to undertake measures to enable students to achieve above threshold standards. Study skills at Level 4 are provided, with a clear timetable of what is available and how it builds upon what has come before. A new student commented on these weekly sessions positively. Students in other years confirmed that study skills sessions continue to be offered. The College continues to make use of the University of Cumbria's grade descriptors across Level 4-7, which helps ensure consistency and clarity with regard to standards. Students were aware of these University of Cumbria documents and hence have clear guidance on what is required to achieve at both above and beyond the threshold. Students met by the panel were able to give several examples of the support offered to go above threshold-level achievement. These included the feedback provided on assignments, which includes guidance on how to achieve at higher levels. Students were positive about the way in which the virtual learning environment modules were populated in ways that gave clarity with regard to what was required to achieve at each level. The Disability Support Officer provides disability support and a relevant policy is in place.

11 Overall satisfaction at module level for the MA has dipped in some areas but is up in others. For two modules, the response rate is very low (14% and 20%). Staff explained that the move to online module feedback had seen a drop in response rate both at the College and at the University and that several measures had been taken to address this. For example, students were given additional time to complete the survey.

12 There continues to be a systematic approach to personal tutoring at the College, which is well-managed during a time where there are changes of staff. Students have a primary personal tutor as well as a back-up tutor in case of emergency. Meetings with personal tutors take place at least termly, though students may approach a tutor at any time. In addition to personal tutors, the College has a system for pastoral care support and an advisor of studies. Students spoke positively of these support mechanisms, giving examples of how they worked in practice. Placement supervisors are themselves provided with support through training offered at the beginning of the academic year.

13 The College continues to face challenges with attendance. This is being managed by the Academic and Student Affairs department, which monitors student engagement with a view to ensuring early intervention in the cases of those deemed to be at risk. Interventions begin where attendance is less than 80% with a non-engagement procedure being initiated where this falls to less than 25% over two weeks. Acceptable mitigating circumstances are explained to students. A new 'At Risk' procedure was put in place in November 2023. The College has taken a proactive stance on this issue which, post-Covid, is also a concern much more widely in the sector.

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

14 Working in partnership with the University of Cumbria, the College continues to align provision to the revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) and has taken account of the May 2023 updates. Both *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications* (FHEQ) and Subject Benchmark Statements are utilised - for example, in the design of the new MA. Staff were able to explain how external reference points are kept under review by the Education Committee and how the University of Cumbria also acts as source of information for quality assurance purposes. The review team noted that the College's Placement Handbook has been aligned to the Quality Code. The College also ensures alignment with the quality and standards requirements of the European Council for Theological Education, of which it is a validated member. Work continues with regard to alignment of the College's provision with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. There is evidence of an increasing role played by college staff in engagement with validations and external examining at other higher education institutions.

15 External examiners are appointed by the University of Cumbria and report using the standard University of Cumbria report form. Overall, external examiner reports continue to be positive and highlight a number of areas of good practice relating to levels of support and feedback provided to students. Recent reports comment positively on the diversity of assessment opportunities and alignment with learning outcomes. External examiner reports also comment positively on marking and feedback given to students, though some discrepancy between individual modules is noted. Staff met by the panel were able to give an account of how one particular matter raised by an external examiner had been addressed. The issue related to the comparative lack of guidance provided to the highest achieving students. Staff are now expected to support such students to achieve at an even higher level, though it was recognised that this becomes increasingly difficult. The sector-wide discussion regarding the use of AI in student work has influenced the College's own approach. External examiners are also sensitive to this issue, which helps the College to remain vigilant. The College's results are confirmed through the University of Cumbria's Assessment Board process.

16 The College continues to engage with a large number of external bodies to ensure the health and wellbeing of its students, staff and premises. 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 UK Visas and Immigration compliance.

## Background to the monitoring visit

17 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.

18 The monitoring visit was carried out by The Revd Canon Professor Kenneth Newport, Reviewer, and Alan Weale, QAA Officer, on 13 March 2024.

**QAA2831 - R14601 - May 24**

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2024  
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)