



# Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) of Belfast Bible College Ltd

March 2021

## Contents

<b>About this review .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The impact of COVID-19 .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Key findings.....</b>	<b>2</b>
Judgements .....	2
Good practice .....	2
Recommendations .....	2
<b>About the provider .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Explanation of findings.....</b>	<b>5</b>
1 Judgement: The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and/or other awarding organisations .....	5
2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities.....	11
<b>Glossary.....</b>	<b>24</b>

## About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Belfast Bible College Ltd. The review took place from 23 to 25 March 2021 and was conducted by a team of two reviewers, as follows:

- Ann Hill
- Sue Miller.

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provision and to make judgements as to whether or not academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These Expectations (and the associated Core and Common practices) are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code)<sup>1</sup> setting out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and of each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

In Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
  - the setting and maintenance of academic standards
  - the quality of student learning opportunities
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

A check is also made on the provider's financial sustainability, management and governance (FSMG) with the aim of giving students reasonable confidence that they should not be at risk of being unable to complete their course as a result of financial failure.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#)<sup>2</sup> and explains the method for [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).<sup>3</sup> For an explanation of terms see the glossary at the end of this report.

## The impact of COVID-19

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the review was conducted online and included meetings with senior management teams, teaching staff and students. The scope of the evidence considered, and the nature of the judgements and operational milestones have remained the same but with some adjustments due to the online format. A risk assessment was carried out prior to the review to identify and mitigate any potential risks.

---

<sup>1</sup> The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code)

<sup>2</sup> QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)

<sup>3</sup> Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers): [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/higher-education-review](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/higher-education-review)

## Key findings

### Judgements

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision.

- The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding body **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

### Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice**.

- The comprehensive ways in which the College collects, monitors, shares and acts upon student feedback in order to enhance student engagement and their learning experience (Q5).
- The effective collaborative partnership with the University of Cumbria which recognises the calibre of academic staff and innovative teaching and learning methods leading to support for the development and approval of the MA Theology programme (Q3, Q8).

### Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **desirable** recommendation.

By November 2021:

- Ensure that there is a more systematic approach to the development of the College's strategic plan, which clearly articulates the time frames for action to be taken (Common practice 1).

## About the provider

The College was founded as the Belfast Bible School and Missionary Training Home in 1943.

The College is ending its partnership with Queen's University Belfast (QUB) as a result of QUB closing its Institute of Theology. All programmes have now been taught out and the Belfast Bible School (BBC) now offers programmes validated by the University of Cumbria (UoC).

Following on from the 2016 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER(AP)), the College produced an Action Plan to ensure the recommendations were implemented and that points of good practice were built upon. The Action Plan was monitored and updated annually. Internal Quality Assurance Objectives linked to the College's Strategy were added when the Strategy was adopted in 2018. While the specific actions from the 2016 review have been completed, ongoing monitoring and enhancement continues as part of managing quality and standards. Following the 2021 QAA review and the finalisation of the revised College Strategy by the Board, a new action plan will be written to guide further monitoring of quality and enhancement. In 2018, a new, simplified committee structure was introduced to streamline business and enhance student representation on the Education Committee - the key mechanism for quality assurance processes. All student representatives are now invited to those meetings of the Education Committee which take place during the semester. Formal training for student representatives was developed and reviewed in 2017-18. This is now complete. The undergraduate and postgraduate programme leaders work closely with the student reps to ensure that they feel supported. The issues raised by the reps in the recent Education Committee demonstrate their awareness of the staff commitment to supporting them. Since the 2016 QAA review, the College has been engaged in a review of the management of the students' placement experience. Increased resources were committed to this area with the appointment of a full-time rather than part-time member of staff. The changes include: increased information for students and placement supervisors; increased training for placement supervisors; increased contact time for students to prepare for and benefit from placement; increased monitoring of the placement experience; regular review with adjustment where needed.

At the time of the review, there were 100 undergraduate (four full-time and one part-time Cert HE; 91 full-time and four part-time BA) and 44 postgraduate (five Grad Dip, 38 MA and one PhD) students. Over the past four years, retention has been 95% and completion 95%. The College has six full-time staff who are lecturers and a Principal who also lectures. All are qualified to doctoral level and four are Fellows of the Higher Education Academy. In addition, the College has a number of part-time associate lecturers who are qualified to doctoral or master's level and who also contribute to the College's programmes. Staff who are lecturing on the undergraduate and master's programmes are approved by the University of Cumbria.

Recent major changes have included the appointment of Dr Helen Warnock as Principal and the introduction of the MA in Theology. The launch of the revalidated Cert, Dip and BA has recruited strongly onto the first year of this programme including a significant number of mature students.

In March 2020, BBC moved to online teaching during the first government-imposed lockdown. The remainder of the semester was taught online, enabling students to complete assignments, making any necessary adjustments in line with guidance from Cumbria. Until then, BBC had limited experience of online delivery.

The decision of the NI Assembly to cap university fees without providing any funding to alternative providers (APs) creates disparity with APs elsewhere in the UK and the lack of loans for postgraduate students at AP in Northern Ireland heightens the disparity between APs in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the UK, and between APs in Northern Ireland and the publicly-funded universities.

## Explanation of findings

This section explains the review findings in greater detail.

### 1 Judgement: The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and/or other awarding organisations

**Core practice (S1): The provider ensures that the threshold standards for its qualifications are consistent with the relevant national qualifications frameworks.**

#### Findings

1.1 Belfast Bible College (BBC) is not a degree-awarding body and responsibility for setting and maintaining academic standards therefore lies with its awarding body. The College has a well-established collaborative partnership with the University of Cumbria (UoC). Ultimate responsibility lies with the University, but many of the responsibilities are shared. The College provided a 'responsibilities checklist' which identifies the levels of delegated authority offered to the College by the awarding body. The university validation process clearly establishes the appropriate academic standards of the awards which are governed by the University's academic regulations. As part of the revalidation process the College regularly reviews its programmes and ensures that the relevant national qualifications frameworks are consulted, including the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements. For example, in respect of the 2018 validation of the MA programme, the College consulted the relevant Subject Benchmark Statement: Theology and Religious Studies, *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and the Dublin Descriptors. There is a comprehensive Institutional Agreement with the University of Cumbria.

1.2 The 'responsibilities checklist' offers the College a substantial degree of autonomy in the delivery and assessment of the programmes of study. The University of Cumbria ensures that qualifications are mapped to the appropriate level of the FHEQ and relevant Subject Benchmark Statements. Qualifications are awarded on the achievement of learning outcomes that students can demonstrate through assessment.

1.3 The College follows the University of Cumbria's programme approval processes and produces definitive programme documents, following the awarding body's templates. For both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, the Annual Monitoring Report (AMR) gathers and analyses information from external examiner reports, National Student Survey (NSS) outcomes, student feedback, module assessment boards and student data.

1.4 In testing this approach, the review team considered the partnership agreement, programme handbooks and specifications, module descriptors, external examiner reports and the awarding body's validation processes. The team tested its findings and understandings through discussions with relevant members of staff, including the awarding body representatives.

1.5 The external examiner reports for the year 2019-20 reflect that academic standards are being met at appropriate levels, and that learning outcomes are being met. Together with the external examiner reports, the College conducts an annual monitoring review of all its programmes and produces an action plan, which further assures the maintenance of academic standards.

1.6 The review team considered that staff had a clear and comprehensive understanding of the processes and structures which ensure that threshold standards for its qualifications are consistent with the relevant national qualifications framework. The College ensures that knowledge and understanding of the relevant academic standards is maintained at organisational level and that programme materials provide a secure framework for the allocation of qualifications at the appropriate academic level. The team, therefore, concludes that the College meets the Core practice and that the level of risk to academic standards is low.

**Core practice: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Core practice (S2): The provider ensures that students who are awarded qualifications have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers.**

## Findings

1.7 The awarding body, the University of Cumbria, has overall responsibility for the awarding of credit and qualifications. The College is required to comply with the academic governance arrangements of the University, which governs the award of academic credit and qualifications for the College's higher education programmes. The College and the University have a partnership agreement which is supported by a management structure and processes to enable oversight of the higher education provision.

1.8 Student success data provides key performance indicators for the College which are utilised to analyse its annual performance through the awarding body's processes. The review team noted the consistently high retention and achievement rates of students. The design of the awarding body's governance framework would allow the Core practice to be met.

1.9 The review team considered the effectiveness of this approach to the award of credit and qualifications by examining relevant university and college policies, regulations, revalidation documentation, student handbooks, assessment information, module guides and minutes from Assessment Boards and other deliberative committees, such as the Education Committee.

1.10 Assessment is designed to ensure that programme learning outcomes can be met. Programme specifications and module descriptors contained within programme handbooks demonstrate that each qualification is allocated to the appropriate level of the FHEQ. Assessment is graded in accordance with the students' ability to exceed, meet or fail to meet the intended learning outcomes. This is clear from the rubric marking criteria provided in UoC's grade descriptors.

1.11 Staff and students met by the review team demonstrated a clear understanding of the assessment regulations, policies and requirements to achieve credit, and they provided evidence of positive engagement with the processes in place. Students confirmed that the academic credit of individual modules and intended learning outcomes is clearly explained to them by teaching staff and that they know what is expected of them to achieve the requisite learning outcomes. They are familiar with the range of assessment strategies identified within programme handbooks which are located on the College's virtual learning environment (VLE).

1.12 For UoC programmes, assessment and award boards are conducted in accordance with university requirements, with attendance of staff from both institutions as well as external members. Marked assessment is also scrutinised by external examiners to ensure that standards comply with national frameworks, and that there is consistency of marking comparable with other institutions. In testing the College's approach, the review team found that the policies and procedures relating to programme partnership are robust, regularly reviewed, and are in line with awarding body expectations.

1.13 The College's committee structure is effective and underpins the organisation's internal quality assurance framework. The review team scrutinised the terms of reference, agendas and minutes of the deliberative committees and found that documentation, such as the AMR, and its deliberative processes are considered before submission to the awarding bodies; thereby assuring effective oversight. The review team considers that the College has developed appropriate mechanisms with its awarding body for the award of credit and qualification which enables students to achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers.

**Core practice: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Core practice (S3): Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the standards of its awards are credible and secure irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them.**

## Findings

1.14 The College is not the awarding body. However, the College is recognised by the awarding body, the University of Cumbria, as an approved provider of its collaborative provision. The College has formal agreements in place with the University. The College supports the University's own responsibility for maintenance of its academic standards. It facilitates this by following the University's academic regulations and validation processes, using the awarding body's appointed external examiners, and by adhering to UK academic practices and partnership review procedures. Quality assurance processes are mapped to the Quality Code and the FHEQ, and are reviewed annually. The processes and procedures put into place would allow the Core practice to be met. The team scrutinised a range of internal and external documentation, including the programme specification and handbook templates from the awarding body and the team held meetings with staff, including link tutors, university programme leaders and the Head of Collaborative Provision from the University.

1.15 The College has shared responsibility with UoC for course design and works closely with the awarding body when developing or revising the curriculum, and there is shared responsibility for course delivery and the setting of assignments. The link tutor or university programme leader is a key link point between the College and the University. The review team heard that both formal and informal communication channels are very good and that matters raised are progressed effectively and speedily. The review team concludes that the awarding body, with which the College is in partnership, has effective measures in place to ensure that the standards of the College are credible and secure. Therefore, the Core practice is **met** and the associated level of risk is **low**.

**Core practice: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## **Core practice (S4): The provider uses external expertise, assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent.**

### **Findings**

1.16 The College is responsible for maintaining the academic standards of the provision it delivers in accordance with the standards set by the awarding body and aligned to the application of UK academic frameworks and regulations. The College's main source of external and independent expertise in maintaining academic standards are the external examiners appointed by the University. The roles and responsibilities of the external examiners, including their consideration of reports, are clearly defined in the awarding body's academic regulations and validation processes.

1.17 The validation and reapproval of programmes requires the involvement of independent external assessors to provide academic and vocational expertise. For example, in accordance with the UoC validation procedure, external team members were appointed to assist in the design of the recently revalidated undergraduate programme. The external validation panel included a university reviewer from the University of Manchester. To further strengthen this process, the College also involved a forum of representative employers to comment upon the development of the programmes and employability potential. The positive input from the employers shaped the academic content for the Developing Practice modules in terms of emphasis on graduate soft skills and attributes.

1.18 The College uses external guest lecturers to deliver its programmes and enhance the overall quality of the students' learning experience - for example, both undergraduate and postgraduate modules include panels of practitioners and, in respect of the MA, an opportunity was provided for students to interact with published subject experts. These arrangements put into place would allow the Core practice to be met.

1.19 In testing the Core practice, the review team considered both internal and external documentation, including correspondence from the awarding body. The team also scrutinised the procedures for, and the reports from, programme approvals and external examiners and held discussions with students, senior and academic staff. Students confirmed that they were involved in the quality assurance processes relating to the revalidation of programmes and that their views were listened to. For example, the external revalidation panel considered feedback provided by students to enhance the undergraduate programmes in terms of rethinking compulsory modules.

1.20 The team noted that the recommendations from the UoC's appointed external examiners are formally processed and considered through the College's annual quality assurance cycle. This includes discussion and action planning at the Education Committee, which meets six times a year. The Annual Monitoring Report is peer reviewed by the University of Cumbria's Programme Committee, with feedback provided to the College. The partnership is reviewed on an annual basis through this process which also monitors the rolling action plan from the previous year's report.

1.21 The College's assessment and classification processes are based upon UoC's Academic Regulations and Academic Processes and Procedures. The UoC grade descriptors are clear and are well understood by students. These descriptors underpin the marking of UoC's assessments at the College. Every module is governed by a Module Descriptor Form (MDF) which comprises the intended learning outcomes and the assessment types for the module. Module handbooks contain the MDF for the specific module and an explanation of the assessment processes, including assignment deadlines. The classification process is available on the College's VLE and is also integrated into the students' study skills provision.

1.22 The College has developed its assessment and internal moderation processes which are subject to annual review. The content of the assessments for each module are reviewed each year and the draft assessments are considered by the external examiners for approval. Improvements in the processes have led to an improved score in the NSS Assessment and Feedback section. Confirmation of continued alignment with assessment procedures, and adherence to processes for internal and external moderation ensure that programmes are delivered as approved, and the academic standards of the awarding body, aligned with the FHEQ, are met. The review team concludes that the external expertise, assessment and classification processes are reliable, fair and transparent.

**Core practice: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**Common practice (Standard 1): The provider reviews its Core practices for standards regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement.**

### Findings

1.23 The College's degree-awarding body has ultimate responsibility for the setting of academic standards. The College is aware of its responsibilities for maintaining these standards and follows the requirements of the awarding body to maintain academic standards effectively. These processes are supported by the College's own internal monitoring procedures and guidance.

1.24 The College regularly reviews its Core practices, primarily through the outcomes of the annual monitoring report (AMR). Action plans are produced from the AMR and these are monitored and evaluated every six months. The monitoring processes on actions to be taken from the AMR are integrated into the University of Cumbria's faculty annual monitoring procedure. The review team confirmed that the outcomes are used to drive forward quality assurance processes and enhancement activities - for example, the structure of the student representative system to continuously improve its effectiveness.

1.25 Review of Core practices includes revalidation and validation processes which link the design of the programmes and module outcomes to national thresholds and ensure that programmes are fit-for-purpose. Curriculum staff regularly engage with key stakeholders, including link tutors, to review the curriculum portfolio. This involves external expertise and is overseen by the UoC.

1.26 At meetings with the review team, staff confirmed that, as the College works in partnership with the UoC, it reviews its Core practices for academic standards regularly. Core practices are reviewed through examination boards, external examiners, partnership reviews and student consultation. Staff provided the review team with examples of outcomes which clearly drive improvement and enhancement. For example, the university programme leader at the awarding body and the partner programme leaders for the undergraduate and the postgraduate provision at the College, meet informally every six weeks in addition to the formal schedule of annual monitoring processes.

1.27 The awarding body receives an annual monitoring report from the College. These are considered at the Education Committee, which engages in an annual process of gathering and considering data, and agreeing actions and enhancements. Matters which are without the direct remit of the committee are referred to the appropriate manager and monitored by the Principal. Students also contribute to the evaluation and review of the programmes through their course representatives. To ensure alignment of policies with the

Quality Code and the validating partner's requirements, staff consult the FHEQ and the Subject Benchmark Statement for Theology.

1.28 Assessment and award boards are held either at the College or the University, and they are conducted in accordance with UoC's requirements. Staff attend from both organisations, as well as the external examiners, who are appointed by the University. The College engages with the external examiners, who comment upon assessment, marking and feedback to ensure that the provider aligns its provision to the FHEQ.

1.29 Internal discussion regarding review of Core practices, including the analysis of key performance indicators and data with a view to improving student success, takes place at the College's Education Committee. The College has responded effectively to a QAA 2016 HER(AP) and has reviewed the internal committee structure and the schedule of committees to improve the operational management of key quality assurance processes. All student representatives are invited to attend meetings. The College has evidenced an improvement of 10% in the NSS results, from 75% to 85% student satisfaction rates.

1.30 The College has built upon previous good practice identified in the 2016 HER(AP), particularly regarding engagement with internal and external stakeholders. For example, a new MA Theology programme was validated by the University of Cumbria in 2018. On the basis of evidence seen, and the discussions with staff and students, this matter is identified as **good practice** in paragraph 2.22. In the autumn of 2020, the College commenced delivery of its revalidated undergraduate programme.

1.31 Although the College has a strategic direction plan which comprises five main strategic aims, it is not clear how this plan is actioned and monitored within a specified operational timeframe. This is discussed more fully in this report at Common practice (1): The College reviews its Core practices for quality regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement.

1.32 The review team scrutinised and considered a wide range of documentation, including previous review reports from QAA, and held detailed discussions with staff and students at all levels. The team concludes that the College reviews its Core practices for standards regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement. Therefore, the Common practice is **met** and the associated risk level is **low**.

**Common practice: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards: Summary of findings

1.33 The review team concludes that the maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of the degree-awarding body at the provider **meets** UK expectations.

## 2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities

**Core practice (Q1): The provider has a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system.**

### Findings

2.1 The College website provides detailed information on their courses and facilities including minimum entry requirements, fees, accommodation, support for disability, and visa requirements for overseas applicants. A full prospectus is also available - this is prepared by the College and checked with UoC before publication. They also publish a range of policies, including their detailed Recruitment, Selection and Admissions Policy, on the website.

2.2 The Covid pandemic has made it difficult to offer potential applicants an opportunity to attend an open day and virtual alternatives have been made available. Similarly, online applications, interviews and digital acceptance packs have now been introduced. A clear Interview Policy, supported by standard questions and a scoring system, is implemented by the experienced Admissions team. Changes to the policy are confirmed with staff and new members of the team receive training.

2.3 Applicants who do not have the standard entry requirements may be accepted onto appropriate undergraduate or postgraduate programmes after review of their prior education and related experience, and on successful completion of an assessment. Full details of these routes are available to applicants in the Recruitment Selection and Admissions Policy on the website. Successful applicants are provided with a range of materials in addition to their acceptance pack, giving them sufficient information to transition seamlessly from applicant to registered student.

2.4 A detailed analysis of recruitment is carried out and compared with previous years. The small number of individuals who were offered places for 2020 but did not take them up have been contacted; their reasons included travel and visa issues - deferring until after the Covid restrictions on in-person attendance are over - and a decision to join a different institution. The delivery pattern designed for the MA and the opportunity for the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) has encouraged applications from a wider population. A formal review of widening participation is scheduled for 2021.

2.5 The implementation of these policies and procedures allows for the Core practice to be **met**. In testing this Core practice, the team examined the College website, internal documentation and the student submission, and tested the efficacy during discussions with staff and students. The review team conclude that the college admissions system is fair, reliable and inclusive.

**Core practice: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## **Core practice (Q2): The provider designs and/or delivers high-quality courses.**

### **Findings**

2.6 Programme approval follows the relevant frameworks and regulations of the awarding body - the University of Cumbria. The College works effectively to review its provision to align more closely with the Quality Code and other external reference points.

2.7 The University of Cumbria is essentially responsible for setting and maintaining the academic standards of the provision delivered on its behalf by the College. The first stage of the awarding body's process, regarding programme design and development, requires the College to gain approval in principle for the introduction of new programmes. An example of this is the development of the recent MA programme which was informed by the FHEQ and the Quality Code. The second stage required by the awarding body's processes entails consideration of the development and approval of the detailed structure and content of the programme including, for example, the appropriate assessment of prior learning criteria for entry onto the master's programme.

2.8 The College's undergraduate provision was recently reviewed and successfully revalidated by the awarding body. This was in response to the changing demographic of students and based on formal and informal feedback from a variety of internal and external stakeholders, including students and employers. An essential component to the revalidation of the BA programme was the further integration of the placement provision into the core course content. Another key element was the development of the Reflective Practice modules which are a feature of the undergraduate programme and were developed to enable students to incorporate practical service, small group work and academic content. Programme design is informed by alumni surveys and the Faculty's scholarly activity which draws upon the research of the highly-qualified academic staff.

2.9 Students play an active part in quality assurance processes at all levels - for example, student representatives are included on committees where decisions about programmes are made. Students met by the team confirmed that changes to programmes are made where appropriate and in response to their feedback - for example, regarding module design and choice.

2.10 The awarding head of collaborative provision and link tutor have a strong relationship with the College and advise on matters of university policies and procedures. It was clear to the review team that the College works closely with the awarding body, and the links between the partner programme leaders and the university programme leader are very proactive, and matters are considered and progressed to enhance the provision. External examiners are invited to comment on revisions to programmes and their reports are consistently positive about the quality of the courses.

2.11 The Faculty continuously reviews the academic programmes to enhance the students' learning experience. The primary quality assurance committee is the Education Committee which meets regularly throughout the academic year to review data, annual monitoring reports, external examiner reports, student feedback and also to agree best practice which identifies improvements for the following year. The Ethics Research Committee and the Library Committee report directly to the Education Committee on an annual basis and are able to raise any issues at other times should the need arise - for example, in response to the Covid pandemic.

2.12 The processes and procedures put in place by the College for the design and delivery of high-quality courses, would allow the Core practice to be met. There are effective processes and systems in place to design and deliver high-quality courses. The review team held meetings with a wide range of staff and students, including senior staff, programme

leaders, link tutors, and academic support staff. The review team scrutinised minutes of relevant committees, including senior management team minutes and the team examined documentation related to the master's validation and undergraduate revalidation processes.

2.13 Programme staff engage with UK academic thresholds to ensure that awards align appropriately with the required academic standards and also align with the awarding body's protocols. The College is aware of, and engages with, the appropriate Subject Benchmark Statements (Subject Benchmark for Theology). The team found that student data and key performance indicators are carefully reviewed and evaluated at several review points throughout the academic year and inform College strategic thinking about programme development and enhancement. For example, the team heard that the annual summer block placement module has been made optional through the University of Cumbria's modification procedure, thus enabling Level 6 students to select either a bloc placement module or a taught module.

2.14 The team noted that the progression and retention rates for the programmes are high and the NSS results continue to remain consistently high with high rates of student satisfaction. Students confirmed that they regularly provide feedback at the end of each module and also through the course representatives who report to the teaching staff twice annually through the Education Committee. Students met by the team stated that their feedback is effectively responded to, for example, a four-week block of reflective reading has been introduced for students.

2.15 Strategic plans for future programmes are discussed at Board level and the College has a fundamental commitment to consultation with stakeholders in developing programmes. The College has built upon previous good practice regarding non-standard entry routes and widening access to non-traditional students. The MA Theology programme is designed to offer block teaching and a blended learning approach focuses on students already in work and combines study with employment. Students met by the team commented positively on the interdisciplinary nature of the programme and its flexibility. For example, the College enhanced the programme by developing learning materials for the students to study prior to returning for the block teaching weeks. Students reported that this prepared them for their choice of modules. Students stated that they were very well supported and appreciated the range of teaching styles and the interdenominational approach to the course.

2.16 The review team also noted that MA students share their research topics through a digital magazine ('Insight') which provides a stimulating and contemporary approach to the interdisciplinary nature of theological study.

2.17 The College continually reviews its programmes and academic standards with a view to enhancement. A key example of this is evidenced in the College's expedient response to the Covid pandemic and lockdown. Interactive teaching was quickly moved online and changes to assessment strategies were agreed with the awarding bodies. Students and external examiners commented positively on the College's response.

2.18 The College operates effective processes for programme design and delivery which are underpinned by clear guidance and support. Therefore, the team concludes that the Core practice is **met** and the associated level of risk level is **low**.

**Core practice: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## **Core practice (Q3): The provider has sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience.**

### **Findings**

2.19 The staff profile at the College indicates a well-qualified and experienced staff, who are also practitioners with strong links to the local community and undertaking active research. The recent validation report for the MA noted as good practice: 'the scholarship of the programme team combined with the number of staff who are Fellows of the HEA'; while the BA validation report identifies as good practice: 'policies that enable significant levels of staff research. This also enables staff engagement with colleagues across and beyond the theological college sector.' The College operates a clearly defined and appropriate appointment process for guest lecturers.

2.20 A well-organised staff induction and a collegiate atmosphere contribute to support new appointees. All staff receive an annual appraisal during which associated training needs are assessed. Personal development targets are set and appropriate specific training is arranged. Where a wider training need is identified, this is addressed through in-house sessions. The College supports staff to attend conferences and UoC welcome staff to take part in events at the University.

2.21 All staff take part in a mentoring and peer review; this contributes to the regular Best Practice sessions. A recent session concentrated on techniques to enable students to use assessment feedback effectively. Students confirmed that the method had been implemented and was very helpful. Support staff are experienced and their contribution is much appreciated by students. Regular contact with counterparts at UoC ensures that staff are kept up-to-date with changes in procedures. Student feedback is always positive in regard to the support they have received.

2.22 Continued application of the policies and procedures for staff appointment and development allows for the Core practice to be met. In testing this Core practice, the team examined the college website, internal documentation and the student submission, and tested the efficacy during discussions with staff and students. The newly-appointed Principal is a highly-qualified academic and teaches on undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The academic calibre, qualifications and experience of the teaching staff ensures the quality of teaching and supports the development and application of innovative teaching and learning, which have drawn positive comments in reports from external examiners and the awarding body. This has supported the revalidation of undergraduate programmes and the development and validation of the new MA in Theology. The review team conclude that staff working at the College are appropriately qualified, skilled and experienced; and that staffing levels are sufficient. The team regards the effective collaborative partnership with UoC, which recognises the calibre of academic staff and innovative teaching and learning methods leading to support for the development and approval of the MA Theology programme, as **good practice**.

**Core practice: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**Core practice (Q4): The provider has sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience.**

**Findings**

2.23 The College is located on a small, self-contained, suburban-located campus. The student accommodation, teaching rooms, administrative offices, chapel and library are located in a series of six buildings. Teaching rooms are well-equipped and spacious - five of the six designated rooms seat in excess of 35; while the smallest, 16-seater room, is used for small groups and seminars. In addition, the chapel can be used for larger events or to facilitate social distancing.

2.24 The library is well-resourced and a recent upgrade to the recording of borrowing has improved the availability of core texts. The move to more online learning during the Covid pandemic has resulted in a move toward purchase of more e-books and online journal subscriptions. Students can access a range of library facilities through the VLE. The qualified librarian liaises with staff and student representatives at regular Library and IT Committee meetings.

2.25 IT resources have been strengthened to support the increase in online learning. Turnitin has been added to the VLE software and hardware upgrades have ensured connectivity and fully support blended learning and videoconferencing. Specific software and hardware support is available to support students to overcome identified learning disabilities.

2.26 Access to support is well-signposted from presentations during Orientation Week, to entries in handbooks and the VLE. Student surveys consistently confirm that the facilities, learning resources and wide range of available support meets their needs. Recent validation events also confirm the College is able to provide the facilities, resources and support required to deliver the undergraduate and postgraduate courses it offers.

2.27 The college facilities, learning resources and support for students allow for the Core practice to be **met**. In testing this Core practice, the team examined the College website, internal documentation and the student submission, and tested the efficacy during discussions with staff and students. The review team conclude that the college has sufficient facilities, learning and support resources to offer a high-quality academic experience.

**Core practice: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**Core practice (Q5): The provider actively engages students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience.**

**Findings**

2.28 The College's approach to student engagement is clearly defined within the College's academic governance arrangements which conforms to the expectations and requirements of the awarding body.

2.29 The College is committed to involving all students in its strategic decision-making and operational management processes, and enables students to contribute effectively to the enhancement of their learning experience. There are formal and informal mechanisms which engage students in influencing their learning experience and course improvement. Undergraduate and postgraduate students are represented on all committees and are

encouraged to share their views. This includes a system for student representation within the College's academic decision-making structures, such as the Staff-Student Consultative Group and the Education Committee - the primary quality assurance committee of the College. Each year, a group of students has a peer-elected student representative who represents them at the Staff-Student Consultative Group (SSCG) and the Education Committee. There is also student representation on the Library Committee. Students with whom the review team met, confirmed that the formal structured training system for student representatives is effective and that good communication with staff helps to ensure that the student voice is heard. For example, when the course representatives felt that students were accessing the student representative system with concerns, rather than dealing directly with tutors, the College speedily resolved this issue so that all parties are clear about roles and expectations.

2.30 Subsequent to the awarding body's annual monitoring process, there is an internal SSCG meeting whereby student representatives meet with the programme team and review the student experience. Any issues arising are progressed through the College's quality assurance cycle to the next meeting of the Education Committee which meets six times a year. This process is continued with the Staff-Student Open Forum which meets in the spring semester. All students are invited to attend and raise issues which are then responded to and escalated to the Education Committee where necessary. Where students are unable to attend meetings, they are invited to submit a report outlining areas which have worked well on their programme, and any other possible areas for improvement. There is also separate student representation on the Library Committee whereby students can raise issues related to learning resources, such as access to increased online resources. The design of these arrangements would allow the Core practice to be met.

2.31 The review team tested the effectiveness of the College's approach to student engagement through discussions with staff and students, and consideration of supporting documentation including the student submission, student survey data, placement feedback, module feedback, and student representation policies and systems. Students with whom the team met, are satisfied with the way that their work and progress is assessed and how they are challenged to improve their grades - for example, through one-to-one tutorials. Students commented that they feel that the feedback they receive is timely and helpful and provides action points which allow students to improve.

2.32 The College has an open-door policy for engaging with the student body and with student representatives on specific issues, such as programme validation and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a proactive approach in seeking and analysing student feedback. For example, during the Covid pandemic, the College sought views regarding the transition to blended learning. Some students identified that they found it hard to concentrate and requested more interaction and the College has responded by shortening the length of online taught sessions and providing a more flexible timetable in respect of assignment deadlines where possible.

2.33 External examiner reports and student feedback are all considered at the Education Committee. Should either of these feedback mechanisms raise issues relating to the quality of the students' learning experience, which are not within the remit of the Committee, the matter is referred to the College's Management Team by either the Director of Education or the relevant programme leader. For example, the College's quality assurance arrangements would ensure that following the Staff-Student Open Forum (SSOF), matters raised there would be discussed at the next Education Committee with the student representatives in attendance. Issues outside the remit of that committee are addressed by the Management Team. Any decision taken by the Management Team is then reported back to the Education Committee and communicated to the students by the appropriate programme leader. The team heard that, in respect of responding to module student feedback about the

Contemporary Issues: Faith and Culture module, the College has changed the assessment weighting to make it more even.

2.34 The College has effective processes for obtaining, reviewing and acting upon individual and collective student feedback through both formal and informal mechanisms. Students are deliberately and actively engaged. The team considers that there are very good opportunities provided to students to engage effectively at all levels of the organisation. The team concludes that the comprehensive ways in which the College collects monitors, shares and acts upon student feedback in order to enhance student engagement and their learning experience, is a feature of **good practice**.

**Core practice: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**Core practice (Q6): The provider has fair and transparent procedures for handling complaints and appeals which are accessible to all students.**

### **Findings**

2.35 The College has a clear and comprehensive policy detailing how it handles complaints and appeals, and the procedure for making a complaint or appeal. The policy is published on the website, in the student and programme handbooks and on the VLE. The College directs students to make any appeal direct to the University and indicates the location of the relevant policy on the UoC website. Students confirmed that they were aware of how to make a formal complaint or appeal. They explained that minor issues were referred to either their student representatives or directly to personal tutors or appropriate support staff, and that these were dealt with promptly and to their satisfaction. Students confirmed that, during placement, their placement handbook provides details of how to manage any concerns. Staff explained that complaints are generally handled informally, and that the last formal complaint was resolved internally and that this was some time ago. The College procedures for handling complaints and academic appeals allow for the Core practice to be **met**. In testing this Core practice, the team examined the College website, VLE and internal documentation, and tested the efficacy of the policy during discussions with staff and students. The review team conclude that the College has an effective policy and procedures to manage complaints and appeals, and that students are aware and supported to make any such claim.

**Core practice: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**Core practice (Q7): Where the provider offers research degrees, it delivers these in appropriate and supportive research environments.**

### **Findings**

2.36 The College does not currently offer any research degrees - this Core practice is therefore not applicable.

**Core practice (Q8): Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the academic experience is high-quality irrespective of where or how courses are delivered and who delivers them.**

## Findings

2.37 The College works in partnership with its awarding body and supports UoC's overall responsibility for the maintenance of academic standards and quality assurance. These arrangements are embedded within assigned Memorandum of Co-operation and a signed institutional agreement which clearly set out the responsibilities of all parties. The College complies with the awarding body's processes for annual reporting, seeking approval for teaching staff appointments, having processes in place for continuous professional development and responding to external examiner reports and student feedback.

2.38 As noted in sections relating to Core practices S1 to S4 in this report, the College shares responsibility for course design, setting assessments and some aspects of student engagement via the partnership review processes. All the current programmes are delivered at the College and within the terms of the responsibilities agreed between the awarding body and the College.

2.39 Responsibilities for monitoring partnership arrangements are delegated to the Education Committee. The College's annual quality assurance cycle is linked to the meeting schedule of the Education Committee. Academic matters which fall outside the purview of the Education Committee are passed to the relevant manager within the College and monitored by the Principal.

2.40 The Education Committee meets six times a year and works to a specified and comprehensive annual quality assurance cycle to monitor the quality of the programmes and ensure compliance with the awarding body's regulations. It has responsibility for systematically monitoring the rolling action plan and annual targets. This includes the review and draft of UoC's AMR, consideration and responses to external examiner reports, and the analysis of data, such as the NSS outcomes.

2.41 Student representatives attend the Education Committee and they consider that their views are taken seriously and acted upon, for example, regarding assessment adjustments. The review team heard that student representatives are well prepared for their role and that the formalised structured training continues to work effectively to improve communication and the flow of information. The Education Committee also considers further initiatives relating to the enhancement of the student learning experience. Overall responsibility for ensuring that action is taken sits with the Chair of the Committee - the Director of Education. The Senior Management Team is responsible for overseeing all external collaboration, validation and review.

2.42 Students are expected to complete a placement. The College has appointed a full-time Practical Training Co-ordinator whose role is to facilitate increased placement supervision and assure quality assurance arrangements. Every student is encouraged to meet with the Practical Training Co-ordinator to discuss placement opportunities. The review team heard that all students are encouraged to be fully involved with the decision-making process and consider placements which will provide opportunities for their future careers. There are placements at all three levels of the undergraduate programme, contributing to the student long-term employability prospects. In response to student feedback regarding the BA Theology, students have a choice to undertake a placement or to study another module. It is the College's responsibility to approve, organise and manage that placement including undertaking risk assessment and safeguarding responsibilities.

2.43 Students are assigned a workplace supervisor who is trained for the specific role. Workplace supervisors attend two training sessions at the College each year, one of which deals with assessment. The College also provides them with relevant continuous professional development on, for example, safeguarding. Training for supervisors has continued online due to the Covid pandemic. Weekly placements have continued during the pandemic, with increased focus on health and safety measures. With agreement from workplace supervisors, students have created an additional backup online objective to mitigate against further disruption to their placements. Summer block placements were cancelled due to Covid restrictions; the College responded quickly to make the module optional and to be continued at a later stage.

2.44 The recently revalidated undergraduate programme includes three modules, such as Developing Practice 1 Discipleship and Service, and Developing Practice 111 Vocation and Connection which provide opportunities for students' awareness of the synergies between learning in placement and learning in other modules. Placement providers are not involved in summative assessment, but they do provide a report at the end of the placement, which contributes towards 10% of marks in the form of a reflective journal. The high calibre and experience of the academic staff, led by the College Principal, has supported the innovative teaching and learning methods employed on programmes, particularly on the MA in Theology programme. The effective collaborative partnership with UoC, which recognises the calibre of academic staff and innovative teaching and learning methods leading to support of the development and approval of the MA Theology programme, is seen as **good practice**.

2.45 This approach would allow the Core practice to be met. The review team tested the Core practice by reviewing a wide range of documentation, including the College's self-evaluation document, the relevant partnership arrangements, committee minutes and workplace agreements and student handbooks. The team also scrutinised UoC AMRs, and the College's processes and procedures for considering and responding to these. The review team met with senior UoC staff and one placement provider. The team also met with students who had undergone placements. Students reported that they were very satisfied with their placement provision which bases their learning in practice. The team heard that, for example, they enjoy the practical element and how it enables the development of people in practical ministry.

2.46 In respect of the organisation of placements, there is a comprehensive suite of documents which clarify the role of tutor, Practical Training Co-ordinator, workplace supervisor and students. The team heard that all parties are clear about their responsibilities. Students are well supported in the placement location, and their learning needs are met in a structured way. The College actively seeks out and responds to their feedback. There are appropriate assessment and monitoring opportunities, and students appreciate the clear flow of information which enhances the College's approach to students' learning experience. The review team concludes that there are effective systems in place for working in partnership with other organisations and ensuring that students have a high-quality academic experience. Therefore, the Core practice is **met** and the level of risk is **low**

**Core practice: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

## **Core practice (Q9): The provider supports all students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes.**

### **Findings**

2.47 Belfast Bible College provides a high level of support arrangements to students to enable them to succeed and achieve their academic and professional aspirations.

2.48 The College responded quickly and effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic whereby interactive teaching was moved online and changes were agreed with UoC regarding assessment arrangements. Students can access learning materials, including programme handbooks, student handbooks and pastoral support materials through the VLE where they have access to a wide range of study and support options. This includes access to a wide range of e-resources and the College has a well-resourced library which contains a suitable breadth and depth of appropriate learning resources, with an additional range of e-resources provided to students since the Covid lockdown. Also, in response to the pandemic, at the start of the academic year, the College provided virtual open days and orientation tours and induction materials which include a digital admissions pack and a Student Wellbeing Hub which provides a range of resources for students, including mental health support materials.

2.49 The College employs a range of well-qualified teaching staff, who engage with the Higher Education Academy and other professional bodies. The high quality of the academic experience is evidenced by students and external examiners' feedback and also noted by the revalidation panels for both the MA and BA Theology programmes. The report highlighted the academic calibre of the team at the College.

2.50 The College takes student feedback seriously and has a wide range of student feedback mechanisms which support all students to achieve successful learning outcomes. Most recently, for example, in response to the Covid pandemic, the College has sought student feedback earlier in the semester, through the student representatives for each year group of the undergraduate programme. This has enabled the College to respond quickly and effectively to students' immediate concerns about adjustment processes regarding assessment processes. Overall feedback for students completing the National Student Survey (NSS) shows a significant increase in satisfaction rates from the previous year from 75% to 85% in 2020. The College responds to the NSS outcomes through the awarding body's annual monitoring report and completes action plans to build on quality assurance processes.

2.51 The review team tested the College's approach to ensuring that it has effective arrangements in place to support students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes by reviewing a variety of documentation, including student success data, action plans, annual monitoring reports, revalidation documentation and committee minutes. The team raised questions in meetings with senior staff, professional support staff and students, with a focus in how the various arrangements were organised, planned and monitored in a systematic way. Processes and procedures in place would allow the Core practice to be met.

2.52 There is a range of accessible and assistive facilities to support the academic success of students. Support is provided both on a cohort basis and an individual basis and is delivered through personal tutors, advisers of studies, module tutors and the disability office. The review team heard that students value the weekly timetabled Fellowship Groups and consider that they are an important aspect of college spiritual life. Students are supported by interest-based groups which meet every six weeks to explore themes like leadership, identity and prayer.

2.53 The review team considered that there is a wide range of effective processes to ensure that students are able to continue with their programmes of study during the Covid pandemic. Students expressed confidence in both academic and professional support staff, and they have been provided with good academic and pastoral care. The College provides highly-qualified tutors to enable the academic success of students and the team found that there is a good network of support mechanisms, including during placement provision. Students are encouraged to contact their personal tutors throughout the academic year to discuss any concerns or issues that either the tutor or the student raises. In addition, advisers of studies meet with students on an individual basis to discuss programme matters, such as attendance. Module tutors are also available at any time to provide support. Some students have found that blended and online learning has been challenging and the College responds effectively and promptly to these issues. The team concludes that the College supports its students to achieve their academic and professional aspirations. The Core practice is therefore **met** and the associated risk is **low**.

**Core practice: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**Common practice (1): The provider reviews its Core practices for quality regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement.**

### Findings

2.54 The College committee structure identifies the Education Committee as the primary tool for the review of Core practices and quality. The committee receives reports from a range of sources such as student representatives and Student-Staff Consultative Committee, student feedback on orientation week, modules, placements and end-of-year, as well as the NSS results, programme leaders and external examiner reports. These are discussed, issues are analysed, and interventions to improve and enhance provision are identified. Actions are clearly defined and attributed and followed up at later meetings.

2.55 The Annual Monitoring Reports prepared for the UoC include analysed statistical information on performance and student feedback. Action planning to address issues are identified, detailed and past actions impact assessed. Policies are reviewed annually; dates and responsibilities are scheduled and document management information on policies clearly states review dates. Individual support functions - for example, recruitment - have a clearly defined quality review cycle including analysis, review action planning, implementation and impact analysis. The quality review processes in place allow the College to drive improvement and enhance its provision.

2.56 In reviewing the Core practices for quality, the team examined a wide range of internal and external sources and documentation, including minutes, policies, reports, handbooks, feedback analyses and online materials. Discussions were held with students and staff in senior, academic and support roles. The team conclude that the College reviews its processes for quality regularly and uses this to drive improvement and enhancement of its provision. However, the team found inconsistent documentary evidence that the monitoring processes were followed up sufficiently to show a clear and systematic use of monitoring results to inform the College strategic planning with responsibilities and deadlines. The team recommends that it is **desirable** to ensure that there is a more systematic approach to the development of the College's strategic plan, which clearly articulates the time frame for action to be taken.

**Common practice: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

## **Common practice (2): The provider's approach to managing quality takes account of external expertise.**

### **Findings**

2.57 The College uses external expertise in a number of ways, including the external examiner who advises on the assessments prior to issue and reports on the robustness of the grading and moderation of the completed assessments. The reports are carefully considered at Education Committee and any recommendations implemented. The recent validation of the BA and MA programmes included external advisers on the panels and during the initial design stages. The inclusion of external expertise enables the College to manage quality with regard to external expertise.

2.58 In reviewing the Core practices for quality, the team examined a wide range of internal and external sources and documentation, including minutes, policies, reports, handbooks, feedback analyses and online materials. Discussions were held with students and staff in senior, academic and support roles. The team conclude that the College takes account of external expertise to manage the quality of its provision.

**Common practice: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

## **Common practice (3): The provider engages students individually and collectively in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience.**

### **Findings**

2.59 Student involvement is managed through a series of surveys covering orientation, individual modules, placement, end-of-year and the NSS. These surveys are analysed and discussed and reported in the AMR and to Education Committee. Any low scores are actioned to make improvements to the quality of the students' educational experience. In addition to feedback, there is a well-organised and trained student representation system. Each cohort elects a representative to join the Staff-Student Consultative Group at which they are able to bring up any issues they have identified. Lead student representatives attend the Education Committee to take part in discussions as well as presenting a report. Student group representatives and their designated IT representative also attend and contribute to Library and IT committee meetings.

2.60 The collegiate atmosphere between staff and students, the small group sizes and regular contact with personal tutors encourages informal discussion and issues can either be resolved informally or reported up for formal discussion and resolution. Students were actively involved in the recent validation events at both the design and validation panel stages. Through this extensive engagement with students, the College is able to involve them in the assurance and enhancement of quality of their educational experience.

2.61 In reviewing the Core practices for quality, the team examined a wide range of internal and external sources and documentation, including minutes, policies, reports, handbooks, feedback analyses and online materials. Discussions were held with students and staff in senior, academic and support roles. The team conclude that the college engages with students to assure quality and enhance the educational experience of the students.

**Common practice: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

## The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.62 BBC has a fair and transparent admissions process which the students found clear and easy with which to engage. Students are interviewed by staff and appropriate guidance is provided which is particularly important for the large proportion of mature students and those returning to education, which the College attracts.

2.63 Academic staff are well-qualified and experienced with senior management also involved in teaching. Many associate lecturers, guest lecturers and panellists are engaged in ministry and involved in current ministerial practice. The College is well-resourced for delivery of the programmes. The partnership with UoC appears to be effective and productive, leading to the new MA in Theology.

2.64 There are clear processes for complaints and appeals at BBC and with the option to escalate to UoC, but students and staff stated that the close symbiotic nature of the institution led to any issues being addressed internally and informally. Students are well-supported, both academically and pastorally, and feel confident that any issues can be dealt with effectively and sensitively. There are effective arrangements for student views and feedback to be considered and acted upon with good formal and informal communication between students and staff.

2.65 BBC has clear processes for the monitoring and review of its provision with oversight from the awarding body. There are effective processes in place for gathering, considering and acting upon student opinion and those met by the team stated that they were confident and comfortable in bringing issues to the attention of staff which were usually dealt with efficiently.

2.66 The review team concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities at the provider **meets** UK expectations.

## Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Definitions of key operational terms are also given on pages 21-24 of the [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\) handbook](#).

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer Glossary on the QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/glossary](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/glossary)

### Academic standards

The standards set by **degree-awarding bodies** for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

### Award

A qualification, or academic credit, conferred in formal recognition that a student has achieved the intended **learning outcomes** and passed the assessments required to meet the academic standards set for a **programme** or unit of study.

### Awarding organisation

An organisation authorised to award a particular qualification; an organisation recognised by Ofqual to award Ofqual-regulated qualifications.

### Blended learning

Learning delivered by a number of different methods, usually including face-to-face and e-learning (see **technology enhanced or enabled learning**).

### Common practices

Practices included in the UK Quality Code that will be applied by providers in line with their missions, their regulatory context and the needs of their students. These are practices common to the underpinning of quality in all UK providers but are not regulatory requirements for providers in England (registered with the Office for Students).

### Core practices

Practices included in the UK Quality Code that must be demonstrated by all UK higher education providers as part of assuring their standards and quality.

### Credit(s)

A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education **programmes of study**, expressed as numbers of credits at a specific level.

### Degree-awarding body

A UK higher education provider (typically a university) with the power to award degrees, conferred by Royal Charter, or under Section 76 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or under Section 48 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, or by Papal Bull, or, since 1999, granted by the Privy Council on advice from QAA (in response to applications for taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers or university title).

### Distance learning

A course of study that does not involve face-to-face contact between students and tutors but instead uses technology such as the internet, intranets, broadcast media, CD-ROM and video, or traditional methods of correspondence - learning 'at a distance'. See also **blended learning**.

### **Dual award or double award**

The granting of separate awards (and certificates) for the same **programme** by two **degree-awarding bodies** who have jointly delivered the programme of study leading to them. See also **multiple award**.

### **e-learning**

See technology enhanced or enabled learning.

### **Expectations**

Statements in the **Quality Code** which clearly and succinctly express the outcomes providers should achieve in setting and maintaining the standards of their awards, and for managing the quality of their provision.

### **Flexible and distributed learning**

A programme or module that does not require the student to attend classes or events at particular times and locations. See also **distance learning**.

### **Framework**

A published formal structure. See also **framework for higher education qualifications**.

### **Framework for higher education qualifications**

A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (FQHEIS).

### **Good practice**

A process or way of working that, in the view of a QAA review team, makes a particularly positive contribution to a higher education provider's management of academic standards and the quality of its educational provision. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

### **Learning opportunities**

The provision made for students' learning, including planned study, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, and resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios).

### **Learning outcomes**

What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

### **Multiple awards**

An arrangement where three or more **degree-awarding bodies** together provide a single jointly delivered **programme** (or programmes) leading to a separate **award** (and separate certification) of each awarding body. The arrangement is the same as for **dual/double awards**, but with three or more awarding bodies being involved.

### **Operational definition**

A formal definition of a term, establishing exactly what QAA means when using it in reviews and reports.

### **Programme (of study)**

An approved course of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

### **Programme specifications**

Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of programmes of study, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

### **Quality Code**

Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is the UK-wide set of **reference points** for higher education providers (agreed through consultation with the higher education community, and published by QAA), which states the **Expectations** (and associated, applicable, Core and Common practices) that providers are required to meet.

### **Reference points**

Statements and other publications that establish criteria against which performance can be measured.

### **Self-evaluation document**

A report submitted by a higher education provider, assessing its own performance, to be used as evidence in a QAA review.

### **Subject Benchmark Statement**

A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

### **Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or e-learning)**

Learning that is delivered or supported through the use of technology.

### **Threshold academic standard**

The minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic **award**. Threshold academic standards are set out in the national **frameworks** and **Subject Benchmark Statements**.

### **Virtual learning environment (VLE)**

An intranet or password-only interactive website (also referred to as a platform or user interface) giving access to **learning opportunities** electronically. These might include such resources as course handbooks, information and reading lists; blogs, message boards and forums; recorded lectures; and/or facilities for online seminars (webinars).

### **Widening participation**

Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.

QAA2605 - R13078 - Jun 21

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2021  
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB  
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

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