



## Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Belfast Bible College Ltd, March 2022

### The impact of COVID-19

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the monitoring visit was conducted online and included meetings with senior, teaching and support staff, and students. The scope of the evidence considered, and the nature of the outcomes 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.

### Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that Belfast Bible College Ltd is making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the [March 2021 Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).

### Changes since the last QAA review

2 Belfast Bible College Ltd (BBC; the College) currently has 104 students enrolled on programmes; 64 are full-time, 40 are part-time and there is one PhD student. Since 2019, and due to COVID-19, enrolments have varied with a total of 125 students in 2019, a decrease to 108 in 2020, and a further decrease to 104 in 2021. In total, there are 5.65 (full-time equivalent) academic staff, 10.57 (full-time equivalent) administrative staff and one senior manager who is Acting Principal and spends 25% of time on academic teaching and 75% on administration.

3 The outgoing Principal left at the end of February and the interim Acting Principal was appointed immediately to ensure continuity. The team was informed of current interviews taking place and a full-time replacement Principal will be appointed by the end of March 2022. There have been no other significant changes to the provision since the last review in March 2021.

### Findings from the monitoring visit

4 All actions identified by QAA in the March 2021 review have been addressed and proposed actions identified (paragraphs 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8). The review had two features of good practice and one recommendation. The College action plan includes details of the planned actions, timescales, details of who is responsible for taking them forward, success indicators and the mechanism for oversight and evaluation. The College committee structure, specifically the Education Committee, is responsible for the monitoring of the action plan. It is too early to evaluate the success of the planned actions as the majority are ongoing with target completion dates identified.

5 The first feature of good practice identified from the 2021 review was the comprehensive way in which the College collects, monitors, shares and acts upon student feedback in order to enhance student engagement and their learning experience. The College is continuing to engage students in assessing the quality of their learning using a

wide variety of formal and informal mechanisms. The formal mechanisms include Module Feedback, the National Student Survey (NSS), Staff Student Consultative Group, year-end surveys and student representation on committees. A new development has been the creation of the Postgraduate Student Committee which has met once.

6 Students spoke highly of the opportunities to provide feedback and the responsiveness of the College to their concerns. They were clear about who and where to go depending on the nature of any concerns. As an example, students reported that changes were made to Chapel activities, and library and study room opening hours in response to student feedback. Block placement activities, which are an integral part of the programmes of study, were impacted by the Covid pandemic. Students reported that this had been a concern at the start of the pandemic but they were very complimentary about the actions taken by the College to mitigate the problem and provide alternative locally-based placement activities when necessary.

7 The second feature of good practice was the effective collaborative partnership with the University of Cumbria (UoC) which recognised the calibre of academic staff and innovative teaching and learning methods leading to support for the development and approval of the MA Theology programme. The partnership continues to be effective. In addition to the formal monitoring activities, meetings of relevant staff are held every six weeks. This ensures that any issues are considered in a timely manner. As an example of the development of the partnership, the College was able to host its own graduation celebration for the first time in November 2021. In addition, the UoC provides access to a very comprehensive range of online training courses and continuing professional development activities, and College staff have taken advantage of these opportunities.

8 The recommendation was for the College to ensure that, by November 2021, there was a more systematic approach to the development of the College's strategic plan, which clearly articulates the time frame for action to be taken. The College Strategy 2021-2026 was approved in June 2021. Alongside the strategy, a yearly detailed implementation plan for 2021-22 was produced. Updates to this plan are considered at three-monthly intervals by the Board. The approach is new and will be reviewed in June 2022. Changes in the leadership of the College, with the appointment of a new Principal, may influence how this is taken forward in future.

9 Monitoring of student performance is undertaken within the annual monitoring and review processes of the UoC and BBC, and is overseen internally by the Education Committee. COVID-19 has had an effect on retention rates with more withdrawals in 2020-21 than is usual; 5 (4%) in 2019-20 and 10 (7%) in 2020-21. Analysis of the data did not reveal any one factor but a variety of factors that were heightened by the pandemic. Rates have returned to normal in 2021-22 and, at the time of the visit, one full-time (2.5%) and one part-time (1.5%) student withdrawal had been recorded.

10 Achievement for full-time students in 2019-20 was 97% (100 students) but no part-time students completed their studies in that year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020-21, 98% of full-time students achieved their qualifications (46 students) and 87% of the 15 part-time students were successful.

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

11 The College uses the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) to manage all aspects of its higher education provision. It aligns its internal processes with the Core and Common practices of the Quality Code by utilising the policies and procedures of the validating university - the University of Cumbria - which in turn uses the Quality Code.

For college-specific processes, such as Admissions, the College develops its own policies and procedures which integrate the relevant aspects of the Quality Code (paragraph 13).

12 The programme design, review and monitoring processes utilise the UoC policies and procedures. The Education Committee provides college oversight of these activities. The monitoring process involves a consideration of the undergraduate and postgraduate annual reports jointly written by both the College and the University. In addition, the College makes use of the university grade descriptors for the assessment of student work. There is university consideration of degree outcomes of the Assessment Boards where results are compared with other departments within the University to help ensure overall consistency. This combination ensures that the College meets the threshold standards for its qualifications and provides opportunities to achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are comparable with other UK providers.

13 The College has a standard application process which is available to prospective students on the College website. Following substantial changes in 2020, only minor changes to the process have been made since the last review. All students have the opportunity to be interviewed in person or online. Staff have received training for online interviews. The comprehensive acceptance pack is made available digitally and contains all key documents. Students were generally complimentary about the admissions process which was informative and efficient. International students did find the application form UK-centric which caused some difficulties but these were dealt with effectively. The process is reviewed annually and the plans for this year involve the addition of further content to the information available to prospective students on the website.

14 Planned enhancements to the programme are ongoing. The roll-out of the revalidated undergraduate programme is continuing and modifications to the postgraduate provision have been formally approved. Changes have been made to the underpinning of the dissertation modules including the introduction of research seminars. The College has well-qualified staff who are supported by part-time Associate Lecturers to provide a wider breadth of experience. The high calibre of the staff was noted in the validation events for both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Developments to the library provision and IT resources are continuing. The students were complimentary about the quality of their academic experience.

15 The College makes use of a variety of external reference points. These include the use of external panel members during programme development and the programme review process. External examiners also provide external expertise to the provision.

16 The College provides a wide range of academic and pastoral support; in addition to a Personal Tutor, lecturers provide academic support and the Advisor of Studies handles more complex cases. Assessment activities are clearly described along with details of assessment criteria. Study skills training is embedded within the programme and additional English language support has been provided this academic year. Disability support has been enhanced with the Disability Officer engaging with students before they commence their studies. Community life is an important part of the student experience. Although activities have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, a range of opportunities are available at the College and online. As noted in paragraphs 5 and 6, there are a variety of effective feedback mechanisms available to students.

## **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 Mrs Catherine Symonds, Reviewer, and Dr Margaret Johnson, QAA Officer, on Tuesday 22 March 2022.

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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)