



Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) of Cliff College

April 2017

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About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education (Alternative Providers) partial re-review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Cliff College. The review took place on 5 April 2017 and was conducted by a team of two reviewers, as follows:

- Ms Elizabeth Houghton (student reviewer)
- Dr Heather Barratt-Mold.

The main purpose of the re-review was to investigate the higher education provided by Cliff College and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These expectations are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code)¹ 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.

This was a partial re-review following an original review undertaken in June 2016, which resulted in the following published [report](#).

The QAA review team made judgements on the one area requiring improvement: the enhancement of student learning opportunities.

A summary of the findings can be found in the section starting on page 2. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 3.

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

¹ The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code

² QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us.

³ Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers): www.qaa.ac.uk/en/ReviewsAndReports/Pages/Educational-Oversight-.aspx

Key findings

QAA's judgements about Cliff College

The QAA review team formed the following judgements resulting from the review about the higher education provision at Cliff College.

- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

Good practice

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

- the effective involvement of student representatives in the development and implementation of the Enhancement Strategy (Enhancement)
- the effective, enthusiastic and College-wide ownership of the Enhancement Strategy by staff, leading to the improvement of the student experience (Enhancement).

Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms** the following action that Cliff College is already taking to make academic standards secure and/or improve the educational provision offered to its students:

- the work being undertaken to develop the use of quantitative data to identify future enhancement opportunities (Enhancement).

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).

About Cliff College

Cliff College (the College) is an evangelical theological college based constitutionally within the Methodist Church of Great Britain. It is situated in the Peak District in Derbyshire a few miles outside Chesterfield. The College's ethos includes a commitment to the holistic development of students, seeking to help them to become spiritually, ethically and intellectually mature, and with an appreciation of the value of accountability in professional life.

The College provides undergraduate and postgraduate courses in the following areas: BA (Hons) in Theology, BA (Hons) in Mission and Ministry, MA in Mission; PhD (Post-graduate research) and PhD Missiology. There are a total of 198 students of whom 48 are full-time, 145 are part-time and five students who have interrupted their studies. There are 10 academic staff of whom nine are full-time and one is part-time.

All of the College's courses are validated by the University of Manchester. Following a successful Periodic Review and Institutional Review by the University in October 2015 (the quinquennial review), the University has renewed the Collaborative Agreement between itself and the College, effective from 1 January 2016.

Following the original review the College developed and approved a new Enhancement Strategy. The Strategy includes a requirement for annual review by the Principal, and an annual report by the Principal to the College's governing body, the Cliff College Committee.

All of this was achieved within the deadlines, and with the active support of staff and students.

The Policy became effective immediately following its internal approval by the Academic Board in January 2017.

Explanation of the findings about Cliff College

This section explains the review findings in more detail.

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a [brief glossary](#) at the end of this report. A fuller [glossary of terms](#) is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the [review method](#), also on the QAA website.

1 Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities

Expectation (Enhancement): Deliberate steps are being taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Findings

1.1 The College's strategic approach to quality enhancement is set out in its Enhancement Strategy, which was implemented following the College's Higher Education Review in June 2016. The Strategy cites the Cliff College Committee (CCC) - the College's governing body - as being responsible for enhancement and setting the College's strategic goals. The Academic Dean reviews the Strategy on an annual basis with input from Programme Leads.

1.2 The CCC meets three times a year with a formal report from the Principal, the Academic Dean, and the Student President. Reports are signed off by the Academic Board. The Academic Dean reviews the Strategy on an annual basis with input from Programme Leads. The Strategy includes a requirement for annual review by the Principal, and an annual report by the Principal to the CCC.

1.3 The academic governance structure supports the strategic approach to enhancement. Enhancement is a standing agenda item on the College's Academic Board, and faculty are required to reflect on enhancement opportunities as part of the Programme Annual Review process.

1.4 There is student representation on core boards and committees, alongside regular opportunities for students to voice both formal and informal feedback to senior staff. The College also uses the National Student Survey (NSS) and Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey to gather student views, alongside module evaluations.

1.5 The policies and procedures of the College allow this Expectation to be met. The team tested the Expectation through meetings with the senior management team, academic staff, professional support staff and students. The team read evidence provided by the College, including strategic statements, committee minutes and terms of reference, programme information, and programmes reviews.

1.6 Staff have a clear understanding that enhancement requires a systematic approach to the making of improvements and make good use of student and staff feedback. There is recognition that as a small provider there are opportunities to make quick responses to feedback but at the same time that areas for enhancement must be agreed through the Academic Board and that the annual review process continues to consolidate improvements. Frequent ongoing conversations outside of formal meetings continue, but are reported as part of the formal process ensuring consistency and completeness.

1.7 The review team heard how the development of the Enhancement Strategy engaged staff and students across the College and resulted in demonstrable enhancement such as improvements to campus facilities and the deliberate and widespread sharing of good practice among teaching staff. Staff confirmed that the College's approach to enhancement encourages a bottom-up approach that enables them to feel invested in the process and articulated positive changes that have resulted from it. This is supported by a governance structure that prioritises enhancement and gives staff space to reflect on how they can improve learning opportunities and share that knowledge across the College through the Academic Board.

1.8 Senior staff are now using information to further analyse their success at widening participation, checking where students come from, how many are non-standard and how well they achieve. Staff are also actively looking at awareness of unconscious bias, supported by continual professional development and have applied this to admissions. The review team concludes that the effective, enthusiastic and College-wide ownership of the Enhancement Strategy by staff, leading to the improvement of the student learning experience is an example of **good practice**.

1.9 Students are keen to stress the improved student engagement. A new Ethics Working Group has a number of initiatives that are student led. Information on the virtual learning environment (VLE) is much more available. This Ethics Working Group has trialled new work with part time students and there is a College newsletter every month. The Student President is on the Library Committee and has been supportive of obtaining responses from students about the way the library works and subsequent improvements. Student feedback is being responded to quickly, such as the introduction of an advanced Hebrew course. The recently constituted Student Leadership Team (SLT) works with the College to provide further enhancement of learning opportunities through a programme of extracurricular activities and support for students.

1.10 Students acknowledge that there is positive student engagement on enhancement priorities, led by the SLT. Students wrote the role descriptors for the representative roles, giving them power over how they represented themselves to the College. The College plans to build a training programme for student representatives guided by former role holders to further facilitate the SLT's involvement in the enhancement process. The review team concludes that the effective involvement of student representatives in the development and implementation of the Enhancement Strategy is **good practice**.

1.11 The review team recognises that the Enhancement Strategy is still in its initial stages, having only been implemented at the beginning of the current academic year. The College plans to review the Strategy and further develop it in future years as they gain a better understanding of the appropriate use of data to drive deliberate steps towards improvement. The review team **affirms** the work being undertaken to further develop the use of quantitative data to identify future enhancement opportunities.

1.12 The review team concludes that the College's reflective and inclusive approach to enhancement means that the Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

1.13 In reaching its judgement about the enhancement of student learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook and considered the progress the College has made against its action plan devised in response to the original review carried out in June 2016.

1.14 The Expectation for this judgement area is met and the level of risk is low. There are two instances of good practice relating to the effective involvement of student representatives in the development and implementation of the Enhancement Strategy and the effective, enthusiastic and College-wide ownership of the Enhancement Strategy by staff, leading to the improvement of the student experience. There is one affirmation, which relates to the work being undertaken to develop the use of quantitative data to identify future enhancement opportunities.

1.15 In the original review, the team concluded that although they could not identify a strongly strategic approach to enhancement there was evidence of support for, and dissemination of, good practice. Since then the College has put in place arrangements for that strategic-level drive, evidenced through a number of College-wide initiatives and staff and students demonstrated ways in which the College's planned approach has led to improvements in learning and teaching.

1.16 The review team therefore concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College **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 22-25 of the [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\) handbook](#).

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality.

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **Glossary** on the QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/GlossaryEN.aspx.

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**).

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

Enhancement

The process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported. It is used as a technical term in our review processes.

Expectations

Statements in the **Quality Code** that set out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

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** that all 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.

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