Specific Course Designation: report of the monitoring visit of Cliff College, April 2019

Outcome of the monitoring visit

1   From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that Cliff College (the College) is making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor and enhance its higher education provision since the April 2018 monitoring visit.

Changes since the last QAA review/monitoring visit

2   The College offers undergraduate and postgraduate full and part-time programmes in Theology validated by the University of Manchester (the University). There are 170 students currently enrolled with 62 studying undergraduate programmes and 93 following the master's programme. Fifteen students are registered for PhD degrees with the University of Manchester. Student numbers have increased slightly since last year, with the increase attributable to improved recruitment in the MA.

3   The BA in Theology programme title has been modified to BA Theology and Ministry for 2019 intake of students, with the agreement of the University and following consultations with students.

4   Of the eight teaching staff, six are full-time. The management structure has remained as reported in the 2018 monitoring review. A new Academic Director had been appointed. Since the last review the College has also allocated welfare-related responsibilities on a part-time basis to one member of staff, a development which met with the approval of students who welcomed the increased support provided in this context. There have been no significant material changes since the last review.

Findings from the monitoring visit

5   The monitoring visit confirmed that the College has made acceptable progress in both continuing to develop and embed the good practice previously identified, and in addressing the six recommendations. In completing actions in response to recommendations, the College's procedures for annual monitoring provide a clear cycle of evidence gathering and reporting and are located within a sound policy framework. The capture and analysis of quantitative data is developing and forms a baseline for the strategic identification and monitoring of improvements. Student admission arrangements are thorough and supported by clear and up-to-date information. Assessment practice is robust and assured through internal and external moderation.

6   The College's procedure for annual monitoring and staff responsibilities is clearly articulated with ultimate responsibility for quality assurance and enhancement held by the Academic Board. The College uses a range of information sources to monitor its provision through the Annual Programme Review process including student performance data, external examiner reports and student surveys. Student Experience Action Plans (SEAPs) are created following the systematic consideration of programme annual reviews and consultation with student representatives. The College intended to develop a College-wide

SEAP, but concluded that evaluation of the programme level SEAPs combined with the Annual Programme Review process met the necessity monitoring requirements to verify completed actions. The process also ensures good practice is disseminated and leads to demonstrable improvements in the student experience. Staff are clearly aware of the College's strategic approach to enhancement and there is an evident commitment to continuous improvement in all areas.

7   In 2017-18, the University undertook a major review of its theological colleges and Cliff College's collaborative partnership was approved. In the same year, the College received a positive annual report on their provision which noted the quality of evaluation and depth of reflection on the part of both students and lecturers in their consideration of the student learning experience.

8   The College continues to collect and evaluate quantitative student data to inform enhancement and strategic management. An analysis of attainment data has been shared with Programme Leads resulting in action such as increased focus on research skills. In the context of the SEAPs; student performance data, NSS results and student feedback are systematically collected and analysed by the College. This process informs future enhancement opportunities and resulting actions are communicated to staff. Analysis of access and ethnicity data is a continuing area of work.

9   The good practice identified in previous reviews has been built upon and developed. Since the last review, the role of Student President has been re-designated into a paid half-time post with a clearly defined remit, including being an active member of College deliberative committees and an important conduit for information flowing from these committees to the student representatives. The appointment process included student input into the selection of candidates and the interview process. The first incumbent of the role received induction and ongoing support through regular meetings with a College mentor. The College are in the process of appointing a second Student President following the success of the first year. A review of the role led to the appointment of a Welfare Officer who will provide student pastoral support, which will allow the incoming Student President's to focus on academic matters. The appointment was welcomed by students.

10   The student representation system continues to operate well. An effective induction and training programme are provided with some additional support by the Student President. Students representatives are formal members of the Board of Studies and contribute written reports of cohort feedback for discussion at these Boards. Programme Leaders' responses to the reports are made available to all students. The College is proactive in its response to issues raised by students. Students commented positively on the accessibility of staff and the responsiveness of both staff and the College to matters brought up by students. Students indicated that recent efforts to engage part time students in response to student feedback were appreciated and this should continue and be extended, particularly for postgraduate students.

11   The process for the formal signing off of information is clearly understood by staff and complies with College's policy. The Executive Committee is ultimately responsible for the content and presentation of public information. The College's Policy regarding the signing off of information makes it clear which member of staff has delegated authority for approval of material. The College had recently appointed a new Marketing and Communications Director in February 2019 to add further rigour and greater expertise to the management and presentation of information in the public domain.

12   The procedure for managing individual admissions including the accreditation of prior learning is detailed and described in the College's Admissions Policy. The policy is reviewed annually with revisions formally approved by Academic Board prior to publication

on the College website. Further information is clearly signposted on the College's website including application forms, terms of reference and programme specifications. Entry requirements for each award are formally approved by the University. Candidates with standard entry qualifications are not interviewed, while non-standard applicants at undergraduate and postgraduate levels are interviewed by the Programme Leader and asked to produce a written piece of work for assessment against criteria provided by the College. The level of language competency for taught programme students is clearly indicated within the Admissions Policy and programme specifications. Formal qualifications are checked for authenticity and suitability with overseas qualifications being evaluated using IELTS scores and UK NARIC criteria. The College's records, which are kept for each stage of the admissions process, were detailed and thorough. Students indicated that information on the website was comprehensive and helpful and praised prompt responses received from the College during the application process. Students on part-time or postgraduate courses recommended further support during their induction to the College and the College has responded effectively.

13   The College is responsible for the overall assessment process including the setting, marking and moderation of assessments. The College has a comprehensive Marking Policy and a range of supporting policies to inform its assessment practices. Assessments and relevant learning outcomes are defined in the programme specifications. The assessment structure for all modules is clearly articulated within the individual module descriptors, which are formally approved by the University. External examiners approve assessments prior to their receipt by students. Written assessments are submitted electronically and systematically checked using anti-plagiarism software. All assessed student work is internally moderated, and the process is rigorously and consistently applied. External examiners review students' work and provide detailed comments on the overall achievement at module and programme level. The College formally responds to any issues raised by external examiners. To improve consistency of marking the College has independently undertaken a blind marking exercise at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels with feedback being provided to each marker. The College's Academic Malpractice Policy and Procedures ensures that all forms of assessment are conducted with rigour and integrity. Students confirmed they found the assessment process and requirements clear and commented positively on the quality and usefulness of the feedback they receive.

14   Statistical data provided by the College for the last three years shows improving recruitment overall due to increased recruitment to the MA Mission and Ministry course. Overall rates of retention have risen from 87 per cent (2015-16) to 92 per cent (2016-17) and 93 per cent (2017-18). Pass rates remain high at 100 per cent for the BA(Hons) Theology cohort who graduated in 2018. Pass rates for students on the flexible MA Mission programme varied due to small numbers in the graduating cohorts.

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

15   The College has continued to engage effectively with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) through the regular checking and updating of its policies and procedures. The College has recently scrutinised admissions and assessment policies to demonstrate their alignment with the Quality Code. To support the effective use of quantitative data in the management and enhancement of the College's provision, the Registrar participates in Data Futures, a National forum to underpin the use of metrics in higher education with particular focus on the implications of data related initiatives for small alternative providers.

Background to the monitoring visit

16   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.

17   The monitoring visit was carried out by Dr Elizabeth Smith, Reviewer, and Miss Siobhain O'Mahony, QAA Officer, on 30 April 2019.