



This review method
is ESG compliant

Annual Monitoring for Educational Oversight

Belfast School of Theology

May 2026

Educational Oversight Review: Report of the monitoring visit for Belfast School of Theology, May 2026

Outcome of the monitoring visit

1. From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that the Belfast School of Theology (BST) is making **acceptable progress** in its continuing management of its responsibilities for academic standards and the management/improvement of the quality of learning opportunities.
2. The monitoring visit was conducted by Elizabeth Shackels, Reviewer, and Julian Ellis, QAA Officer, on 13 May 2026.

Changes since the last QAA review

3. In March 2026, Belfast School of Theology (BST/the School) had 58 students enrolled across its higher education programmes, which are validated by the University of Cumbria (UoC). These programmes span Levels 4 to 7 and include the BA (Hons) Theology (34 students), MA Practical Theology (11 students), MA Theology (3 students), and a range of certificate, diploma and graduate-level awards.
4. Since the May 2025 Educational Oversight Review (EOR), the most significant material change has been BST relocation from its former premises at Glenburn House, Dunmurry, to new accommodation on the campus of Stranmillis University College (SUC), Belfast. This change of address was notified to QAA in accordance with the required 28-day reporting obligation. BST now occupies space across three floors of the main building at SUC, incorporating classrooms, library facilities, a chapel, student lounge, offices and staff rooms. The current licence with SUC is for a five-year term with provision for renewal. There have been no changes to awarding body arrangements, programme portfolio or senior staffing since the 2025 review. BST employs a combination of full-time and part-time academic staff, supplemented by associate lecturers. A new full-time Lecturer in Applied Theology and Placements Programme Lead was appointed following the review.



Findings

5. The review team concludes that BST is making **acceptable progress** in its continuing management of its responsibilities for academic standards and the management and improvement of the quality of learning opportunities. The acceptable progress judgement is supported by evidence of progress in response to all five recommendations and both good practice points from the May 2025 Educational Oversight Review (EOR) report (paragraphs 7-13). The primary driver for this monitoring visit was the material change of premises: BST's relocation to Stranmillis University College (paragraph 3), which has been managed effectively. Student data demonstrates strong retention and performance (paragraph 15). BST continues to engage meaningfully with the UK Quality Code and relevant external reference points (paragraph 16).
6. The review team found BST has responded to all five recommendations and both good practice points from the May 2025 EOR report, evidenced through its action plan and the supporting documentation provided in the annual return. Most actions are clearly in progress within the stated timescales, and BST's action plan effectively tracks intended actions, responsible officers, target dates and evidence against each item.
7. Good Practice 1 identified the support from the School and placement providers to ensure a high-quality learning experience during placements. BST has built on this by appointing a new full-time Lecturer in Applied Theology and Placements Programme Lead, combining two previously separate roles. The review team heard from students how this has strengthened coordination between the School and placement providers, enhanced communication, and improved the authenticity of academic assignments. Placement providers and Christian mission agencies are now invited to campus, including to Orientation, to meet students and share opportunities. The School has also engaged in active dialogue with new and existing placement partners. The review team considered that the appointment of a dedicated Placement Programme Lead has had a positive impact on the integration of academic and placement activity.
8. Good Practice 2 identified the range of activities during Orientation Week to support student integration and the College ethos. This good practice has been maintained and enhanced. The review team heard from students that the 2025 Orientation event was especially significant given the campus relocation to Stranmillis University College, making it important for both new and returning students to become familiar with the new environment. The Student Support Officer led the Orientation from planning through to post-event review, with input from all staff and the Student Committee. The three-day programme covered academic expectations, student support services including study skills, library, IT, disability and pastoral care, registration and policy information, community worship and social activities. The review team heard that a post-event debrief identified areas for improvement and informed future planning, demonstrating a reflective and evaluative approach to this area of good practice.



9. Recommendation 1 required BST to continue taking steps to ensure the role of the Education Committee and its relationship with the Board of Directors was clear. This has been substantively addressed. The Board resolved the naming confusion between the two committees sharing the same title by formally renaming them: the staff body is now the “Education Committee” (chaired by the Head of Education) and the Board sub-committee is now the “Academic and Learning Committee”. The Terms of Reference for the newly established Academic and Learning Committee have been approved. The Committee had already held one meeting prior to the visit and had scheduled a further meeting, with additional meetings planned for 2026–27. An end-of-year review of the effectiveness of the new committee structures is listed as “planned” and remains outstanding. The School has committed to its establishment during the 2026–27 academic year, demonstrating a clear and proactive approach to continuous improvement. At the next monitoring event the review team will wish to confirm that this effectiveness review has been completed and that the committee structures are operating as intended.
10. Recommendation 2 required BST to strengthen its approach to quality and standards management by developing individual strategies for quality assurance and enhancement, and for learning, teaching and assessment. Progress is ongoing and appropriate to BST’s scale and context. The review team considered that BST has engaged thoughtfully with the UoC’s Learning, Teaching and Assessment (LTA) Plan, noting that a direct mapping exercise is premature given the Plan’s forthcoming revision. Instead, BST has undertaken a conceptual mapping of the LTA Plan’s principles to its own provision, identifying areas of alignment and uniqueness, for example the place-based, Northern Irish theological context and the integration of ministry placements. Graduate attributes have been reviewed for continued relevance. The UoC Subject Periodic Review (April 2025) confirmed BST’s alignment with UoC validation criteria, QAA frameworks and subject benchmarks, and specifically commended the School’s embedding of employability and entrepreneurship. Staff have also accessed UoC learning and teaching development opportunities, including sessions on generative AI in assessment, feedback, and authentic assessments. Development of a BST specific annual Teaching and Learning Plan with clear oversight, monitoring and student involvement is a planned next step and should be confirmed as complete at the next monitoring event.
11. Recommendation 3 required BST to give more attention to the systematic analysis of qualitative and quantitative data to enhance practices and processes. BST’s response reflects its size and ethos: informal weekly programme team meetings involving Programme Leaders, the Academic Registrar, Admissions Officer, e-learning support and the Disability/Pastoral Care Officer provide a forum for swift identification and resolution of student concerns. Attendance monitoring with threshold-based outreach is in place and has led to timely and effective interventions for two students in the current period. However, the action plan called for a formal Data Monitoring Sub-Group to be convened by October 2025, with a systematic annual data workplan. The annual return did not explicitly confirm that this sub-group has formally convened or that the data workplan has been produced and this was confirmed during the visit. Although the sub-group is yet to be established, the review team were assured by the School’s firm commitment to implement this during the 2026–27 academic year.



12. Recommendation 4 required BST to make greater use of VLE analytics and resources to enhance the student learning experience. Progress has been made, and the review team heard from students that Moodle is used as the primary delivery platform for the MA Practical Theology, with student participation in quizzes, readings, forums, video lectures and synchronous sessions tracked. For on-campus UG modules, completion of VLE activities is also monitored where applicable. UoC staff development opportunities in areas including generative AI and assessment have been made available to BST staff, and BST has engaged with the Horizon Education Network for specific Moodle training. However, the action plan target to deliver structured Moodle training for all lecturers, including associate lecturers, by January 2026 is not explicitly confirmed as completed in the annual return or during the visit. The School has, however, indicated that this training will be completed by the end of September 2026.
13. Recommendation 5 required BST to ensure wider careers and employability advice is provided consistently to all students across all programmes. BST has responded actively. The annual Envision Jobs fair brings Christian organisations and mission agencies to campus, and job opportunities are regularly disseminated to staff and students by email. The University of Cumbria PGCE pathway is signposted to BST students. The UoC Subject Periodic Review (April 2025) commended BST's embedding of employability and entrepreneurship as good practice, noting specifically the creation of the Disability Support Worker/Pastoral Care Worker role as evidence of commitment to inclusion. Action plan targets relating to authentic assessments and the inclusion of vocational skills in module design (January 2026) are ongoing and this commitment was confirmed to the review team during the visit.
14. BST demonstrates an established set of internal quality monitoring processes appropriate to its size and context. The Education Committee meets bi-monthly and informal weekly programme team meetings provide a forum for rapid identification and resolution of student-related concerns. The Annual Monitoring Report submitted to the University of Cumbria, supported by bi-annual Quality Review meetings, provides the primary formal vehicle for internal quality assurance. The UoC Subject Periodic Review (April 2025) provided an additional layer of external scrutiny, concluding that BST aligns with UoC validation criteria, QAA frameworks and subject benchmarks. The review team considered Mid-semester and end-of-semester module feedback, student representation on the Education Committee, and the Student-Staff Consultative Group ensure student voice is embedded in quality processes.



15. Student data provided in the annual return demonstrates broadly positive trends in retention and achievement. At the point of submission in March 2026, BST had 58 students enrolled across Levels 4 to 7. The overall retention rate for BA (Hons) and MA programmes stands at 92.6%. While there were three UG withdrawals, this was offset by two students converting from lower-level awards to the full degree programme. Similarly, two MA withdrawals were offset by one student converting from PG Certificate to MA. This continuation of strong retention is consistent with data reported in previous annual monitoring cycles. UG student achievement was strong, with 82% of completers achieving a first or upper second-class award: 9% achieved a first-class award, 73% a 2:1, and 9% an ordinary degree. At postgraduate level, of the MA completers, five achieved merit and three a pass, with no distinctions awarded. The significant growth in MA student numbers (from 3 to 12) is attributable to a new externally funded scholarship programme, which BST acknowledges addresses the systemic barriers of ineligibility for postgraduate student loans and cost-of-living pressures. BST monitors attendance and progression data regularly, with threshold-based outreach to students at risk, which has resulted in timely and effective interventions. The data is discussed within the Education Committee and submitted to the University of Cumbria as part of annual monitoring processes.

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

16. The review team considers BST demonstrates continued and active engagement with appropriate external reference points to maintain academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. BST manages its provision in alignment with the UK Quality Code, the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), and the QAA Theology and Religious Studies Subject Benchmark Statements. The annual return provides a detailed mapping of BST's response to all eleven Sector-Agreed Principles, supported by documentary evidence. The University of Cumbria Subject Periodic Review (April 2025) confirmed BST's alignment with UoC validation criteria, QAA frameworks, and subject benchmarks, and commended BST embedding of diversity, inclusion, employability and entrepreneurship across its programmes. BST draws on UoC's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Plan as a framework for enhancement, adapting its principles to its specific theological and Northern Irish context. BST uses external expertise in admissions (International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and UK ENIC for the recognition and comparison of international qualifications and adheres to the Fair Admissions Code of Practice. Membership of the European Council for Theological Education (ECTE) and engagement with the Horizon Education Network for VLE development provide further external reference and staff development opportunities. As confirmed by staff and students, External Examiners continue to provide assurance of academic standards and have made positive observations regarding teaching quality, assessment design and feedback practices.



QAA3081 – R14972 – June 2026

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2026
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB

Tel: 01452 557000 (voicemail only)

Web: www.qaa.ac.uk

