



This review method
is ESG-compliant

Educational Oversight Review

Belfast School of Theology

May 2025

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About this review

This is a report of an Educational Oversight Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Belfast School of Theology.

EOR consists of a number of components. The Full component is a review of a provider's arrangements for maintaining the academic standards and quality of the courses it offers against the 12 Sector-Agreed Principles contained within the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (2024) (the UK Quality Code). A Full component review will assess a provider against the core requirements of the Home Office in relation to educational oversight and the UK Quality Code as common UK framework. Further information about the Full component of EOR can be found in the [Educational Oversight Review Guidance for Providers](#).

The review took place from 20 to 22 May 2025 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Revd Canon Professor Kenneth Newport (reviewer)
- Professor Paul McDermott (reviewer)
- Ms Kirsten Koss (student reviewer)

The QAA Officer for this review was Dr Julian Ellis.

In Educational Oversight Review (Full component), the QAA review team:

- determines an outcome against each of the Sector-Agreed Principles outlined in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education
- identifies features of good practice
- makes recommendations
- identifies areas of enhancement activity
- determines an overall judgement as to whether the provider is fully aligned with the Sector-Agreed Principles of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission. A dedicated section explains the method for [Educational Oversight Review](#) and has links to other informative documents. QAA reviews are evidence-based processes. Review judgements result from the documents review teams see, the meetings they hold, and drawing upon their experience as peer reviewers and student reviewers.

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) provide the framework for internal and external quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area. QAA's review methods are [compliant with these standards](#), as are the [reports we publish](#). More information is available on our [website](#).

This review was conducted in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

Executive summary

Belfast School of Theology (the School/BST) was founded as the Belfast Bible School and Missionary Training Home in 1943. The School changed its name in 1971 to Belfast Bible College and in 2024 the College became Belfast School of Theology. The Mission of the Belfast School of Theology is an inter-denominational community with a mission to educate ‘... through theological education and spiritual development within a vibrant academic and worshipping community’. To this end the School delivers BA (Hons) in Theology, an online MA in Practical Theology and range of part-time courses.

The School has had a validation relationship with the University of Cumbria since 2010 that covers the BA and MA awards. At the time of the review, there were about 40fte students studying at the School, 33 FTEs on the BA (30 full-time students and 6 part-time students) and 7.5 FTE on the MA. In 2024-25 the School has three full-time lecturers, one part-time lecturer (the Principal) and eight associate lecturers, most of who have a PhD qualification, and all have a post-graduate qualification. A new post of e-learning coordinator has also been created to support the new online MA.

The School has experienced many changes in recent years and is going through a transitional period. Major changes have included the appointment in June 2022 of a new Principal, and more recently the appointment of a new Head of Education in August 2024. Because of the ongoing concerns about a decrease in student numbers there have been some significant strategic changes, including the change of name in 2024 and most recently the School has taken the decision to relocate from its current site. The move to the Stranmillis University College campus in the centre of Belfast is intended to enhance the student experience through new cultural and social opportunities and to better ensure a sustainable economic model.

In reaching conclusions about the extent to which Belfast School of Theology meets the Sector-Agreed Principles, the QAA review team followed the evidence-based review procedure as outlined in the guidance for Educational Oversight Review (July 2024). Belfast School of Theology provided the review team with a self-evaluation and supporting evidence. During the review visit, which took place 20-22 May 2025, the review team held a total of seven meetings with the principal and member of the governing body, senior management team, academic staff, professional support staff, students, alumni and external stakeholders.

In summary, the team found two examples of good practice and identified five recommendations for improvement.

Conclusions

The QAA review team reached the following conclusions about the higher education provision at Belfast School of Theology.

The QAA review team determines that Belfast School of Theology:

- **is fully aligned** with the Sector-Agreed Principles of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

Good practice

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

- The support from the School and placement providers to ensure a high-quality learning experience for students during their placements (**Sector-Agreed Principle 8**).
- The range of activities during the Orientation Week to support student integration and the College ethos. This is reinforced annually to disseminate and update information for students (**Sector-Agreed Principle 10**).

Recommendations

For recommendations that relate to areas for development and enhancement that do not impact on the Sector-Agreed Principle being met the QAA review team makes the following recommendations:

- Continue to take the necessary steps identified by the School, to ensure the role of the Education Committee and its relationship with the Board of Directors is clear to avoid any misunderstanding about where the responsibility for quality and standards sits (**Sector-Agreed Principle 1**).
- Strengthen the approach to management of quality and standards and the enhancement of learning by developing individual strategies for Quality Assurance and Enhancement, and Learning, Teaching and Assessment (**Sector-Agreed Principle 1**).
- Give more attention to the systematic analysis of qualitative and quantitative data to enhance practices and processes relating to teaching, learning and the wider student experience (**Sector-Agreed Principle 4**).
- Make more use of the analytics and resources available on the VLE to enhance the student learning experience (**Sector-Agreed Principle 5**).
- Take steps to ensure wider careers and employability advice is provided consistently to all students across all programmes of study (**Sector-Agreed Principle 10**).

Financial sustainability, management and governance

The financial sustainability, management and governance (FSMG) check has been **satisfactorily** completed. The outcome of the FSMG check for **Belfast School of Theology** is that **no** material issues were identified.

Explanation of the findings – Sector-Agreed Principles

Principle 1: Taking a strategic approach to managing quality and standards

Providers demonstrate they have a strategic approach to securing academic standards and assuring and enhancing quality that is embedded across the organisation.

Findings

1 Over the past two years, the Belfast School of Theology (the School/BST) has undertaken extensive work regard to its future role and sustainability. This has included an overall organisational review of the senior management and governance structure. The review team explored the details of this top-level structure to understand whether, in principle, there are clear lines of responsibility and reporting in securing academic standards and the assurance and enhancement of quality (see below).

2 As Head of School, the Principal has executive responsibility for quality and standards. This responsibility is discharged through the Education Committee that oversees and operationalises relevant quality and standards processes and procedures. The Education Committee has one sub-committee, Research Ethics. The Education Committee is chaired by the Director of Education with the Principal in attendance. The review team explored how the Education Committee works in practice and found the current Terms of Reference (ToR) do not show direct lines of reporting other than “The Chair of the Committee will raise issues as required with the Management Team or the Principal as appropriate”. In practice the review team learned that the Education Committee reports to School’s Board through the Principal’s Report. The review team also felt there was a lack of clarity about whether the Education Committee was a standing or subcommittee of the School’s Board.

3 In meetings with the review team, senior staff indicated that work was already underway to address these issues and drew the review team’s attention to newly drafted ToRs. These give an extended range of responsibilities for the Education Committee that broaden its work in several key areas. They also make it clear that the Committee is a standing committee of the School’s Board, to which it directly reports. The team **recommends** that the School continues to take the necessary steps to ensure the role of Education Committee and its relationship with the Board of Directors is clear to avoid any misunderstanding about where the responsibility for quality and standards sits.

4 The School has a partnership arrangement with the University of Cumbria (UoC) where the University is responsible for appointing and responding to external examiners, the approval of academic appointments and for complaints and appeals that have been escalated following the completion of the School’s procedures. The School responsibilities include responsibility for assessment, course design, delivery and monitoring, recruitment, admissions learning resources and student. The review team found that the School understands its role in the strategic ownership of quality and standards within the overall collaborative arrangement with the UoC. In a meeting with the UoC representative it was confirmed to the review team that the School is diligent in meeting the requirements of the validation agreement.

5 The School is in the process of moving to the Stranmillis University College campus. In reviewing documentation, and in conversation with staff, the review team formed the view that the extensive work that has been undertaken on a strategic approach to enhance quality and the wider student experience. For example, the Stranmillis site offers upgraded teaching

and learning facilities. Furthermore, the overall financial benefits of the planned move will include a new endowment fund, which will be used to ensure year-on-year funding for teaching and learning and secure long-term financial sustainability. The review team affirms the actions taken in seeking to place the School on a firm financial footing while also providing students with enhanced learning resources.

6 The School has a Strategic Plan that covers the period 2021-2026 that includes development of academic provision. The strategic plan sets out key aims and objectives, giving clear statements of intent and the ways in which, the objectives will be supported through governance, finance and the wider School infrastructure. The review team considered that the strategic plan was clear and covers matters related to securing academic standards and assuring and enhancing quality.

7 The School's website includes a set of policies and procedures covering various aspects of the student experience which is accessible to staff and students. However, the team was unable to see individual document outlining the School's overall approach to the management of quality and standards and learning teaching and assessment. When raised by the team with both senior managers and academic staff it was agreed this was a gap in the School's overall approach to quality and standards and learning and teaching. Consequently, the team **recommends** that to further strengthen the School's overall approach and ensure greater coherence and consistency it develops individual strategies setting out the School's overall approach to Quality Assurance and Enhancement and Learning, Teaching and Assessment (see also Paragraph 71).

8 The School has a published statement relating to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, which is consistent with that of the UoC and the School has its own Disability Policy. Together these make it clear that BST has an approach to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion that is robust and supports the maintenance of academic standards as well as accessible learning.

9 Overall, the review team concluded that the Belfast School of Theology recognises its responsibility within a partnership for the strategic management of quality and standards. While the structure for operationalising this responsibility is limited, it is sufficient given the size of the provider. The Belfast School of Theology therefore is **aligned** with the Sector-Agreed Principle.

Principle 2: Engaging students as partners

Providers take deliberate steps to engage students as active partners in assuring and enhancing the quality of the student learning experience. Engagement happens individually and collectively to influence all levels of study and decision making. Enhancements identified through student engagement activities are implemented, where appropriate, and communicated to staff and students.

Findings

10 The Education Committee, the Staff-Student Consultative Group (SSCG) and the Staff Student Open Forum (SSOF) all provide opportunities for the student voice to be considered through the inclusion of student-year representatives. In addition, there is a Student Committee made up of elected student representatives which acts as a formal link between staff and students and covers a wide range of topics about the student experience. Overall responsibility for actioning student feedback lies with the Head of Education and the team heard from staff and students how student feedback is used to inform approaches to assuring and enhancing the quality of the student experience.

11 Student feedback is most often collected through surveys. Survey questions are generally brief but do encourage students to identify areas for improvement. There is an early survey conducted in the first few weeks of semester one to collect feedback at an early stage so that changes can be made if required. The review team saw evidence of feedback from this survey leading to changes in the curriculum content. Students are also invited to complete an 'End of Module' survey which informs improvements. Students enrolled on the new masters in Practical Theology were invited to provide weekly feedback, which led to students suggesting more suitable dates for assessment activity, feedback which was quickly actioned and implemented by the school. Furthermore, the review team heard from alumni who were invited to provide input at the design stage of the new masters in Practical Theology. Additionally, a Student Staff Open Forum is hosted termly, and it is open to all students to liaise with, and feedback to, academic staff. A student representative attends the Board of Governors meetings at least twice annually to share the students' experience, to ask questions, and to respond to queries from the Board.

12 Each undergraduate and postgraduate year-group has a student representative and the review team heard from student representatives on the MA Student that they have regular contact with the course leader. Student representatives are provided with information about the roles and responsibilities including representing the views of students, helping to monitor and develop courses and providing a link between the students on the course, the School and the University of Cumbria. The training for representatives includes helpful information for gathering and presenting student feedback, as well as providing information on signposting to additional support.

13 Student representatives are invited to meetings of the Education Committee to work in partnership with the academic team to address any concerns raised by students with the curriculum, as well as to enhance the curriculum. Meetings are hybrid allowing flexibility for student attendance. Student representatives are given time during meetings of the Education Committee to voice student feedback, with staff responding to concerns, and actioning feedback as appropriate. Staff also use this as an opportunity to ask the student representatives to gather feedback from their year group and make minor changes to the curriculum. Student feedback is clearly actioned and reported to student representatives at the Education Committee. Some Education Committee agenda items are closed, when dealing with confidential matters, which necessarily means students are excluded from these items.

14 In response to student feedback and a drop in application numbers, the School is

planning a move to Stranmillis where they will rent part of the Stranmillis University College campus. Student feedback suggests a desire for a more integrated student life which it is hoped will be provided in their new, city centre location. Recent meetings between the newly elected Student Committee and the Principal support this change of location. The School took its current cohort to the new Stranmillis location where students with mobility needs raised issues with the accessibility of the building, feedback which led to the school investigating more suitable entry routes for students with reduced mobility.

15 Overall, the review team concluded that students participate in every level of decision making from course level to board level, and their feedback is vital to both shaping and improving the curriculum. The involvement of students in the Education Committee provides a formal mechanism for feedback from students to be heard and actioned. Staff regularly update students on the progress of feedback received the Belfast School of Theology therefore is **aligned** with the Sector-Agreed Principle.

Principle 3: Resourcing delivery of a high-quality learning experience

Providers plan, secure and maintain resources relating to learning, technology, facilities and staffing to enable the delivery and enhancement of an accessible, innovative and high-quality learning experience for students that aligns with the provider's strategy and the composition of the student body.

Findings

16 The review team heard about the School's plans to relocate to Stranmillis University College, in time for the 2025-26 academic year. The review team were presented with evidence in the Business Plan of the financial circumstances behind the move in a clearly outlined budget and forecast showing that the school will become more financially sustainable through the move and provide greater resource for the student learning experience. The review team found no evidence that current cohorts of students will be materially disadvantaged by the move.

17 The review team looked at the School's processes relating to the annual reviews as required by the UoC. This annual review of programmes and modules includes consideration of resources for learning and demonstrated that budgets were flexible enough to allow for some annual variation based upon student learning need. In addition, operational plans involve analysis of the School's circumstances to inform each cycle of funding and planning, and these are communicated in the Principal's report to the Board of Trustees.

18 The School's approach to budgeting demonstrates that operational plans enable the effective planning and management of budgets relating to staffing and the student experience. This approach supports a student focused approach which was confirmed by students who met the review team and reinforced the view that the academic and support staff are student focused. For example, students confirmed to the review team that if they required specific learning resources to complete their undergraduate dissertation or more materials for the online MA, they are provided.

19 The School's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is a key learning resource across all programmes whether they are delivered face to face or fully online. During the visit, the review team received a demonstration of the VLE, which involved an academic staff member and a student outlining use of various aspects of the platform. This included an overview of programme-level information, as well as individual course pages, which function as a 'roadmap' to students as they progress through a module, facilitate assessment and the return of feedback. Students told the review team about their satisfaction with how the VLE is used to support their learning.

20 The School library is on the campus near teaching and staff spaces and offers a physical collection and access to online resources through EBSCO and a virtual e-library for e-books. Other resources may be obtained through inter-library loans and arrangements with other learning providers libraries.

21 Scrutiny of academic and senior staff CVs by the review team showed that staff of the School are suitably qualified to deliver the teaching and learning on the validated programmes. There is evidence of staff engaging in research and scholarly activity and these experiences among the 'faculty' feed back into the learning and teaching provided. Academic staff are drawn from varied subject backgrounds which are consistent with the disciplines covered by the Schools programmes. Staff also receive help from collaborations with the University of Cumbria, including the opportunity to get HEA fellowships through the University's framework and access to other staff development opportunities including a

Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PGCHE).

22 Additional opportunities are available for the ongoing professional development of both academic and professional services staff of the School through the Schools own professional development activity. Examples cited during the visit included training on safeguarding, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), EDI and IT which currently provides legally required training activities for all staff. Academic staff benefit from an annual research and scholarship allowance/fund which enables them to present at conferences or undertake associated scholarly activity. The review team heard how professional services staff can also undergo extra training relevant to their role by making specific requests to their line manager. In addition, staff benefit from the support offered through professional membership of relevant bodies, such as the European Council for Theological Education, which provides support for both academic and administrative staff.

23 Overall, the review team concluded that the School's approach to the planning and maintenance of resources relating to teaching and learning was sound to support the delivery of a high-quality student learning experience. The Belfast School of Theology therefore is **aligned** with the Sector-Agreed Principle.

Principle 4: Using data to inform and evaluate quality

Providers collect, analyse and utilise qualitative and quantitative data at provider, departmental, programme and module levels. These analyses inform decision-making with the aim of enhancing practices and processes relating to teaching, learning and the wider student experience.

Findings

24 The review team found evidence of student data collection and analysis at various levels within the School, including at the provider level through the Education Committee and module level through the module evaluation report. For example, an issue relating to the lower-than-normal achievement of one cohort of students had identified and discussed at the Education Committee. Data relating to extensions, withdrawals, module feedback and feedback relating to the intensive teaching week was also noted, and here too there is evidence of discussion. During the visit, the review team heard that data at module level is sent directly to the Chair of Education Committee, as are reports on student progression and achievement. Any relevant matters are brought to Education Committee for consideration.

25 The review team noted that the partnership agreement with the UoC required the School to undertake an annual monitoring review. This process is central to the School's gathering and review of data. The team reviewed the Annual Monitoring Report (AMR) for BA and MA Theology 2023-2024. The AMR includes actions to be followed up, for example, low retention rates between Level 4 and Level 5 due to students transferring to another course, the non-completion of assessments and because of low student numbers overall. There were also concerns about communication of changes, and a proposal for academic support listed as going to Education Committee for review in December 2024, following identification in the AMR. Upon reviewing the minutes of Education Committee for September and November 2024, the team noted that these items do not feature, though there was discussion relating to student support at the committee in January 2025. In discussing this matter with senior staff, the review team learned that there had been consideration of the low retention issue outside of the committee structure and that the cause of the low retention had been identified and action taken with additional support provided for students. However, the review team considered that there should have been a more formal approach adopted in the consideration of the data to ensure the data collected and any emerging issues are considered systematically and consistently. Therefore, the team **recommends** that the School gives more attention to the systematic analysis of qualitative and quantitative data to enhance practices and processes relating to teaching, learning and wider student experience (see also Paragraph 35).

26 The School Data Protection Policy is available online and via the student-facing VLE. There is also a set of data management guidelines and further guideline documentation that is labelled as relating to UoC, although the team noted that it also carries the BST logo. Additionally, both the undergraduate and post-graduate programme handbooks (2024-2025) refer to data protection, giving students clear information about how both the School and the UoC share personal data. The review team saw evidence that the Research Evidence Committee considers student research involving data and surveys.

27 The review team formed the view that the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) documentation provides an adequate overall framework within which staff and students may work. Staff met by the review team showed a good awareness of BST's approach to data management and evidenced completion on the "GDPR Foundations" course. During the visit, the review team learned that all staff must now undertake the GDPR Foundations course by a specified a deadline, and certificates are kept centrally as a record of completion. Staff in other meetings confirmed that this system is in place.

28 Overall, the review team concluded that the School regularly collects both qualitative and quantitative data at all levels of the provision. Evidence of analysis of such data is found. Data protection arrangements are clearly spelt out and both staff and students are aware of the provider's approach to data protection. The Belfast School of Theology therefore is **aligned** with the Sector-Agreed Principle.

Principle 5: Monitoring, evaluating and enhancing provision

Providers regularly monitor and review their provision to secure academic standards and enhance quality. Deliberate steps are taken to engage and involve students, staff and external expertise in monitoring and evaluation activity. The outcomes and impact of these activities are considered at provider level to drive reflection and enhancement across the provider.

Findings

29 The School's approach to monitoring, evaluation and enhancement is grounded in the validation arrangements with its partner the University of Cumbria (UoC). A representative from the UoC confirmed that School follows the requirements of the UoC in full and the review team saw copies of Subject Periodic Review (SPR) outcomes, AMRs, and module feedback by students. The University Academic Quality Framework establishes a series of strategic requirements relating to monitoring and evaluation, which include the School adhering to AMR guidelines, UoC regulations, and all aspects of the partnership agreements and periodic review processes.

30 The School reports into the Humanities Quality and Standards Committee at the UoC which then reports into the University's collaborative operations sub-committee, through to the Academic Board. The UoC representative and the leadership team at the School confirmed the good working relationship between both organisations which allows for effective operationalisation of the partnership. This formal process is supplemented by six weekly meetings between the School's academic team and staff from the UoC. Both parties described the mix of strategic, formal and informal meetings allowed for an effective operational working relationship, with the student experience taking precedence. The review team considered that the monitoring of academic quality and standards through the monitoring, evaluation and enhancement of provision was secure as the formal procedures provided good management and recording while the informal allowed for timely solution focused approaches to matters that needed immediate attention.

31 The School's approach to annual self-assessment at programme level follows expectations of the UoC AMR. It was noted by the review team that programmes are reviewed on a six-yearly basis under the SPR process, with guidance on the involvement of external personnel. The review team consider that suitable processes are in place to enable programmes to be reviewed effectively.

32 The review team were informed that the undergraduate provision had successfully completed the SPR process in April 2025 and that a number of commendations were made. The report was not available to the review team as it was still going through the UoC approval process. The MA provision was validated two years ago and the review team heard and saw evidence of continuous improvements that had been made through external examiner recommendations, student feedback and the academic team's own reflections. For example, the extension of library opening hours, and changes to modules reflecting student feedback.

33 The review team considered the steps taken to engage and involve key stakeholders in monitoring and evaluation activity and found examples of this with alumni, placement providers and staff. For example, evidence was presented showing the use of alumni in curriculum development on the new MA and in the SPR processes. The review team also heard about the involvement of placement partners and employers in the enhancement of procedures such as ensuring that students are fully understand the nature of the placement in advance and that the placement providers are fully briefed on any additional support required by students. There is also the representation of staff on the Education Committee and a Best Practice Group for teaching staff that enabled staff to identify areas of teaching

and learning that have gone well, such as the building of collaborative Ministry Skills and class debates.

34 The review team also considered evidence relating to student involvement in the monitoring process changes in the delivery and format of the MA programme, to examine how monitoring, evaluation and enhancement worked in practice. The review team found that students and former students were all involved in the process. For example, students asked to meet staff weekly to discuss the format and delivery of the programme. Changes have been implemented and all parties reported that this had been effective in making the programme work better, allowing staff to consider changes to the curriculum as part of the annual review and continuous improvement process. The involvement of students in monitoring and evaluation activity was also demonstrated through the regular meetings between the programme leader, the Principal and the Student Committee, a practice which was viewed positively by the students.

35 The review team heard feedback from academic staff and students regarding the use of the VLE in teaching and learning. It was clear that staff could view and track the progress students were making in terms of completing quizzes and seeing the number of attempts made by students at answering questions. In addition, staff could also see when students accessed readings and other material on each of the module sites. This information presents a valuable opportunity to monitor and track student progress and use of such resources, information and analytics to consider how to enhance further the learning opportunities for students. The review team therefore **recommends** that the School make more use of the analytics and resources available on the VLE to enhance the student learning experience (see also Paragraph 25).

36 The review team considered the mechanisms that are used at the School to monitor and evaluate provision on an ongoing basis. Students complete end-of-module evaluation forms, which are summarised at programme level. There is the Student Committee which meets at quarterly intervals throughout the academic year and includes student representatives and key staff (see also paragraph 11). The students met by the team considered the Committee as an effective way to raise issues. In addition, all students are invited to an annual open staff student forum where any issues about the student experience can be discussed. The review team considered these mechanisms to monitor the student experience is a positive example of the School's ability to respond promptly to student feedback to enhance the student learning experience.

37 External Examiners are appointment by the University of Cumbria. There are two external examiners appointed on a four-yearly basis, with the possibility of an extension. Review of the current and recently retired external examiners background by the review team shows suitability for the role, while scrutiny of the associated reports shows a positive evaluation of the School's teaching and learning with confirmation that academic standards at the School are set and managed appropriately. Discussion with an existing and outgoing external examiner reinforced the review teams view that externality was working effectively and that the School responded in a timely and effective manner to externals issues and questions.

38 Overall, the review team concluded that the University frameworks and procedures and their adoption and adherence by the School enable monitoring and evaluation and enhancing provision sufficiently effective to secure academic standards and enhance quality. The Belfast School of Theology therefore is **aligned** with the Sector-Agreed Principle.

Principle 6: Engaging in external review and accreditation

Providers engage with external reviews to give assurance about the effectiveness of their approach to managing quality and standards. External reviews offer insights about the comparability of providers' approaches and generate outcomes that providers can use to enhance their policies and practices. Reviews may be commissioned by providers, form part of a national quality framework or linked to professional recognition and actively include staff, students and peers. They can be undertaken by representative organisations, agencies or professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) with recognised sector expertise according to the provision being reviewed.

Findings

39 As a small provider focused exclusively in one area of study, opportunities for the School to engage with external bodies is limited. None of the provision is subject to review by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRB). There are, however, three more general ways in which the School engages with external bodies regarding quality and standards.

40 The School underwent Educational Oversight monitoring visits by QAA in March 2024, March 2023 and March 2022. Higher Education Reviews were conducted in 2021 and 2016. The outcomes of all these engagements with the QAA were positive. There was evidence of the School addressing the matters raised through appropriate actions. For example, the 2021 HER report indicates that a more systematic approach to the School's strategic plan should be adopted. Throughout the later monitoring visits by QAA and during the present review this more systematic approach is clearly in evidence.

41 The School's commitment to external review is seen in the positive way in which it has engaged with the awarding body, the University of Cumbria (UoC). As part of these arrangements, the School engages in annual monitoring and Subject Periodic Review (SPR). As a small provider, BST benefits from the wider expertise and assurance resources of its validating body. The UoC's role in the appointment of external examiners ensures that those appointed are academics who understand, and work to, the general expectations of UK higher education. External examiner reports are uniformly good. External examiners confirmed that they receive responses to reports and were able to give examples of where changes had resulted, such as providing more opportunities for students to develop specific areas of interest and more comments on assignments with high marks. It was clear to the team that the relationship between the School and the UoC is strong and based upon a recognition of clear lines of responsibility within the overall delivery and monitoring of provision.

42 Placement supervisors also provide the School with feedback relating to student performance and the effectiveness of the placements within the overall structure of the programme. While this level of external engagement is not PSRB-related and does not form part of a formal provider-commissioned review of provision, the feedback is beneficial to the assurance of standards and is built into the School's strategic approach to monitoring and evaluation of provision.

43 Overall, the team concluded that the School's approach to external review and accreditation was proportionate and enables the School accurately to assess its alignment to UK sector norms regarding the management of quality and standards. Belfast School of Theology is therefore **aligned** with the Sector-Agreed Principle in this area.

Principle 7: Designing, developing, approving and modifying programmes

Providers design, develop, approve and modify programmes and modules to ensure the quality of provision and the academic standards of awards are consistent with the relevant Qualifications Framework. Providers ensure their provision and level of qualifications are comparable to those offered across the UK and, where applicable, The Framework of Qualifications for The European Higher Education Area.

Findings

44 The School works with the UoC for the award of both its undergraduate and post-graduate taught provision and uses a comprehensive suite of documentation by which to design, develop, approve and modify programmes, including the University's academic regulations, Curriculum Design Framework, Validation Guide and the Guide to Periodic Review. The academic regulations for the design, approval and modification of programmes are in line with the national qualifications and credit frameworks.

45 This suite of documents provides clear points of reference and is consistent with sector-wide practice and relates both to the volume and level of study. The team studied the programme agreements for undergraduate provision and the MA Practical Theology and noted these are still in date (ending 31 August 2026 and 31 August 2030 respectively). The programme agreements provide clear guidelines for ongoing programme management, including SPR, and the role of students in providing feedback and evaluation.

46 The School works with the UoC to ensure that the undergraduate provision is also aligned with the subject benchmarks. The team reviewed the document 'Mapping the Undergraduate Programme to the Theology and Religious Studies Subject Benchmark Statement' (January 2025 Update) and confirms that the School has updated its provision to ensure alignment. Staff met during the visit were able to speak with confidence about how their programmes meet the appropriate standards, including alignment with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) and subject benchmarks. Although the partnership with the UoC was identified as of fundamental importance to the assurance of quality and standards, staff at the School clearly understand the role of the School itself in this collaborative partnership.

47 Minor modifications, those which do not affect Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) or assessment practices, can be made at local level and approved by the Education Committee. For major modifications there is a process managed by the UoC that staff understand and ensures that local practice is consistent with what has been approved by the University.

48 Module guidelines reviewed by the review team were judged to be consistent with the requirements as set out in the programme specifications, with appropriate assessment for the level at which the module is set. Students can access the information necessary for successful completion, including detailed assessment that covers guidance on how to achieve above threshold standards. Details of staffing, and of the relevant external examiner, are also provided in the module guides.

49 The review team sought evidence of external consultation on the design of the latest new provision, the new MA. Alumni indicated that they had been proactively contacted and were invited to comment on the proposed provision. External Examiners also confirmed that this was the case.

50 Overall, the review team concluded that within the context of the partnership with the

UoC, the School fully exercises its responsibilities regarding the design, development, approval and modification of programmes. The result is that quality and standards are appropriately set and maintained. The Belfast School of Theology therefore is **aligned** with the Sector-Agreed Principle.

Principle 8: Operating partnerships with other organisations

Providers and their partners agree proportionate arrangements for effective governance to secure the academic standards and enhance the quality of programmes and modules that are delivered in partnership with others. Organisations involved in partnership arrangements agree and communicate the mutual and specific responsibilities in relation to delivering, monitoring, evaluating, assuring and enhancing the learning experience.

Findings

51 The School delivers its postgraduate and undergraduate programmes in partnership with the University of Cumbria (UoC). Other key partnerships relate to the provision of student placements with local placement providers. The review team examined the documentation and met with representatives underpinning the management and operation of these partnerships.

52 The UoC Academic Collaboration for Associate Partners handbook sets out in detail how key aspects of the partnership are to be managed and operationalised, including the due diligence process and the governance arrangements for collaborative provision oversight. The process for validation and review of programmes is also set out and this is reinforced by UoC's Academic Regulations which provides the framework of rules that programmes and modules adhere to. Programmes of study are re-evaluated on a six-year basis through the University's Subject Periodic Review process. The review team also saw the wider evidence supplied relating to the support UoC provides for its partners on all aspects of the running of a partnership and includes validation procedures and processes, guide to periodic review, programme specification guidance, and programme agreements. The review team considered this documentation as thorough and comprehensive.

53 The nature of student admission arrangements is also captured in this documentation which show that the UoC takes responsibility for setting the standard and requirements of all entry. This is considered at the point of validation and regularly assessed through the subject review process. Once admitted by the School student admission data is shared with UoC to enable a record to be created on the University student record system. UoC take guidance on this annually should there be a requirement for amending admission requirements between SPR cycles from the School alongside advice from external examiners.

54 In addition to these formal partnership arrangements, the review team heard about the informal arrangements set up to operationalise the day to day running of the partnership. This includes meetings between the UoC and School staff on a six-weekly basis. The team were told that these meeting provided opportunities for the School to get advice and guidance that specifically addresses issues that would not require escalating through a formal process. It also allowed the relationship between the two parties to establish a thorough understanding of each other's needs and requirements. The review team formed the view that the oversight and operational relationship between the UoC and the School was strong and robust.

55 Students are engaged in Ministry Training with weekly placements for students at levels 4 (Year 1) and 5 (Year 2) and students at level 6 (Year 3) on block placements in their final year. Students on placements are gaining experience in a range of area of ministry, including Children and Youth work, Schools work, Preaching, working with refugees and supporting families in crisis (see also paragraph 65). To understand the School's approach to the management and governance of its other key partnership, placements partners, the review team examined extracts taken from the School's Risk Register as well as the placements documentation. In this context, the risk register shows appropriate levels of detail about placements as well as clear ownership of each risk outcome. The review team

formed the view that potential risks emanating from partnership activity was actively and appropriately managed by the School.

56 In addition, the review team met with external partners and saw evidence about the process for establishing, running and monitoring placements and their links with the School. Placement partners, students and alumni commented on the benefit and value of these placements provided to students and commented on their usefulness as part of the wider course aims and objectives. The detail and depth of coverage of this documentation was impressive as was the adherence of this to UoC regulations, the Schools own guidelines to placements as well as the partners feedback on the operation of the relationships created. It was also clear that the School ensures up-to-date and comprehensive records of are kept for each placement partnership. This led to the review team to form the view the support from the School and placement providers ensures a high-quality learning experience for students during their placements and was a feature of **good practice**.

57 The review team also heard about other wider partnerships that the school and its staff engage with to support staff in their professional development. This included the European Council for Theological Education which acts as a quality assurance network for providers of theological education, staff fellowships through the HEA and associated use of the Advance HE resources bank and local theological community networks.

58 Overall, the review team concluded that the School's approach to the engagement and management of partnerships is appropriate and proportionate, with mechanisms in place to ensure governance oversight and operation especially with placement partners, thereby ensuring a suitable learning experience for students. The Belfast School of Theology therefore is **aligned** with the Sector-Agreed Principle.

Principle 9: Recruiting, selecting and admitting students

Providers operate recruitment, selection and admissions processes that are transparent, fair and inclusive. Providers maintain and publish accurate, relevant and accessible information about their provision, enabling students to make informed choices about their studies and future aspirations.

Findings

59 The admissions procedures are clearly laid out for applicants in the Admissions Policy, including documentation and indicative timescales for decisions on applications, including provision for specific requests by the Admissions Officer as detailed in the UG Admissions Procedure and MA Admissions Procedure. The review team found clear and detailed admissions information on the School's website and students confirmed that these were easily accessible at the point of application. The ethos of the School is clearly laid out in the opening section of the Admissions Policy which allows prospective students to make informed decisions. Progression routes from other courses at the School are made clear in the Admissions Policy together with contact information. Support for care experienced, disabled, international applicants, refugees and asylum seekers, and applicants with criminal convictions is clearly laid out in the Admissions Policy, in how they are supported in the application process, when to declare, and how they would be supported during their studies.

60 If an applicant applies for a course where they do not meet the pre-requisites, they are advised on alternative courses at the School and elsewhere by the admissions team. Staff are given clear guidance on how to assess prior learning and professional experience. Where mature applicants do not have academic qualifications but significant ministry experience, they are invited to apply for admission using the Accredited Prior Experience and Learning (APEL) route, detailed in the APEL Procedure.

61 Clear academic expectations for all students applying to the School are set out prior to an interview. They include expectations about the style of learning that covers workload and commitment, the need for active learning, community learning and holistic learning. Applicants invited to interview are given clear instructions regarding the interview and its purpose. Interviewers are provided with a matrix for assessing applicants who come to interview, with clear guidance for staff when assessing students. The review team heard from students that they found the interview process supportive and informative about the programme of study and student life at the School. The review team found that decisions on applications are made in a timely fashion and that a clear appeals process and its procedure is detailed in the Admissions Policy.

62 Overall, the review team concluded that the School operates a comprehensive approach to recruiting, selecting, and admitting students, making use of clear and easily navigable processes. The School has several alternative entry routes to study, representing a commitment to a fair and inclusive education and clear course information is available to prospective students on the BST website. The Belfast School of Theology therefore is **aligned** with the Sector-Agreed Principle.

Principle 10: Supporting students to achieve their potential

Providers facilitate a framework of support for students that enables them to have a high-quality learning experience and achieve their potential as they progress in their studies. The support structure scaffolds the academic, personal and professional learning journey, enabling students to recognise and articulate their progress and achievements.

Findings

63 The Student Handbook provides information about the support available to students at the School. This includes Personal Tutors who help students plan their workload or deal with any issues arising from the academic work, an Advisor of Studies who is available to discuss any aspect of a student's course or academic career and offer advice and support and access to a Student Pastoral Support Worker to support the students integration into a Christian learning community. The Student Handbook is supplemented by activities in Orientation Week where sessions are organised to help students understand the support available at the School, including academic, pastoral and professional support.

64 The review team considered that an effective package of support is available for students at the School. For example, the team heard from students that they valued the library offering, with both a wide range of physical and electronic resources available. Students spoke positively about and showed a good understanding of the study skills and pastoral support available and how to access it. A disability support officer is in place to support students and ensure reasonable adjustments are made, including on placements. Students have access to a range of different software to support learning including effective notetaking, support for neurodivergent students, text-to-speech, and other assistive technologies. The Disability Policy is clear in the support provided for students and prospective students with disabilities, and commits to an inclusive environment, and details who students and applicants can contact for additional information and support.

65 Students are made aware of the attendance expectations in the Student Handbook. The Student at Risk Procedure clearly states procedures for staff when dealing with students whose attendance has dropped below the School's acceptable threshold of 80 per cent, and clear steps are in place, as detailed in the Attendance Monitoring Procedure; staff regularly review student attendance through weekly team meetings. The Fitness to Study Policy details clear procedures for assessing a student's capability to continue on their course. Attendance policies are explained to all students during Orientation Week, occurring one week before term begins. Additional training is mandatory for staff undertaking a role in Pastoral care, and these members of staff are supported by the Safeguarding Lead and Senior Leadership. Pastoral carers are supported by the Pastoral Care Worker who works with the Disability Support Officer.

66 Students are encouraged to take part in three distinct placements, through participation in weekly and 4-week block placements in their final year and are encouraged to seek opportunities to widen their skillsets (See also paragraph 54). Placement providers include the following organisations, Church Army, Logos Ministries International, Crown Jesus, Church of Ireland, Elim, Rylands Nursing home. Placements are decided in collaboration between the student and the Ministry Training Coordinator, allowing students to have ownership over their placements, while providing expert guidance from staff. The review team saw and heard evidence of students and staff working together to identify the best placement to meet the needs of the students in their professional development.

67 Clear safeguarding expectations are set by the School for all potential placement locations for students. The Block Placement Handbook makes clear the link between formal placements and academic study modules, and key contacts for students on placement are

made clear, with each student assigned a placement supervisor. The School works closely with proposed placements to ensure the placement is suitable and with appropriate support for students. Students have access to all learning materials and policies on the VLE. The review team considered that regular reflection by students, meetings with placement supervisors and with the Ministry Training Facilitator is facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students on placement.

68 While the focus of the School is providing a training for Ministry, the review team considered that there was a risk that this becomes too focused on only one specific area of professional development and that there was insufficient information provided for students on other professional options. In the meeting with students, the review team were told that while the placements were good in preparing them for a particular role there was a lack of other information about potential careers and that the information that was provided tended to be too late, insufficient and inconsistent. When the team met with professional support staff, it was acknowledged more could be done to ensure the provision of wider careers and employability advice. Consequently, the review team **recommends** that the School take steps to ensure wider careers and employability advice is provided consistently to all students across all programmes of study.

69 The review team also heard from professional support staff about one initiative using data collected through the admissions process from student disclosers to enable the early identification of needs to help the prompt production of reasonable adjustment plans for disabled and neurodiverse students, enhancing student learning opportunities and meeting the Schools approach to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). The team considered the approach of the support staff and agreed that this could be extended once in place, to develop a learning support plan process that could be applied to all students to support progression opportunities for struggling students and provide stretch opportunities for those students looking to maximise their learning opportunity. By building this into a Learning Teaching and Assessment Strategy it could further integrate the holistic and strategic approach to providing high quality learning opportunities (see also paragraph 7).

70 There is a comprehensive induction, 'Orientation Week', supporting students to settle into their new environment at the School. The review team heard that students felt the orientation week was comprehensive and noted that all students – including online students – were invited to the day. Orientation activities focus on academic, social and pastoral aspects of the School's, showing a commitment to a high-quality learning experience. The review team considered that the range of activities during the Orientation Week to support student integration and the School's ethos and reinforced annually, to disseminate and update information for students was a feature of **good practice**.

71 Overall, the review team concluded that Belfast School of Theology operates a comprehensive approach to supporting students, with effective pastoral and academic support complemented by a culture which supports an active and vibrant student community. Particularly strong focus on placements is supporting a high-quality learning experience, though some work could be done to improve overall careers and employability advice. The Belfast School of Theology therefore is **aligned** with the Sector-Agreed Principle.

Principle 11: Teaching, learning and assessment

Providers facilitate a collaborative and inclusive approach that enables students to have a high-quality learning experience and to progress through their studies. All students are supported to develop and demonstrate academic and professional skills and competencies. Assessment employs a variety of methods, embodying the values of academic integrity, producing outcomes that are comparable across the UK and recognised globally.

Findings

72 The School's approach to teaching, learning and assessment is documented in validated programme specifications that are updated through ongoing and periodic review. The review team heard that the University of Cumbria (UoC) also has a 'Teaching and Learning Plan' that is used to inform practice and delivery at the School to enhance the student learning experience. The Learning Plan sets out the UoC's expectations for learning, teaching and assessment, establishing a set of priorities for the School. The Learning Plan includes themes that set out key areas the School needs to prioritise. These include, for example, the incorporation of graduate attributes, innovation and creativity in terms of assessment types and approaches to enhance student engagement. The review team formed the view that the School relied heavily on the direction that the UoC's provided through its 'Plan' and the Learning, Teaching and Assessment statements situated within each of the Programme Specifications. There was no individual Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy developed and used to provide a cohesive direction of what and how learning is constituted at the School. In discussion with both senior managers and academic staff about this absence, both groups supported the idea of developing an institutional wide Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (see also Paragraph 7).

73 The review team met with students and alumni who told the team that academic staff had discussed aspects of employability with them while studying at the School, especially in latter stages of their course. It was further noted that practical skills-based elements and transferable skills feature heavily throughout the curriculum. While these are clear in the documentation, there was little made of this important element of the curricula when meeting with Staff. The presence of a Learning Teaching and Assessment Strategy would in part help make these skills more visible (see also paragraph 7) and would help in preparing students for post study experiences, the world of work and recognising the attributes that graduates derive from their time at the School. The senior and academic teams are aware of this and told the review team about plans to improve this by building graduate attributes into course documentation and signal to placement partners and students the full merits of the course and its wider learning value. The review team concluded that these aspects collectively are likely to be useful to students' future careers and the Schools mission to be recognised as a School with a broader remit for the study of theological study, attracting a wider mix of students.

74 The review team heard that assessments are both second marked and moderated. Moderation uses a process of sampling which given the small numbers of students on each of the programmes, means 75-85 per cent of the papers are included in the sample. Dissertations and core projects are double-marked, and this is consistent with the published policy. The review team considered the School's approach to assessment in further detail during meetings with staff, students and UoC staff. The staff wish for assessment to evolve using more innovative forms of assessment and UoC staff confirm that there are directives for all departments and partners to focus on innovative assessment as part of the UoC 'Learning Plan' approach. The review team considered that the School's approach to assessment and securing academic standards was robust and rigorous and this view was supported by the Schools external examiners.

75 The UoC regulations state the importance of prompt feedback on assessment and in this respect the School works to a 20-day turnaround policy. Students confirmed that feedback on assessed work was prompt and useful, aimed at improving their learning for future assessments. The demonstration of the VLE also showed the team how the system is used to allow students to upload assignments and receive returned marks and feedback. This was further confirmed by scrutiny of the external examiner and collaborative partner reports from which the review team concluded that the School's approach to the management of assessment, including the provision of feedback, was appropriate.

76 Overall, the review team concluded that the provider offers a high-quality approach to teaching, learning and assessment which is grounded in robust teaching scholarship principles across both undergraduate and postgraduate taught levels. The Belfast School of Theology is therefore **aligned** with the Sector-Agreed Principle.

Principle 12: Operating concerns, complaints and appeals processes

Providers operate processes for complaints and appeals that are robust, fair, transparent and accessible, and clearly articulated to staff and students. Policies and processes for concerns, complaints and appeals are regularly reviewed and the outcomes are used to support the enhancement of provision and the student experience.

Findings

77 The review team recognised that because of the relatively small scale of the School, any issues raised by students are generally dealt with at an informal level and actioned appropriately without the need to use a formal appeals or complaints process. However, there is a Student Complaints Policy in place which enables students to raise complaints both informally and formally. Information about the complaint's procedure can be found in the student handbook and on VLE. Complaints can be raised informally with individual staff or through the Student Committee, allowing students to raise concerns in an environment where they may feel more comfortable. Formal complaints can be submitted in writing to the Head of Education using the Student Complaint Form. The complaints policy clearly outlines the timescales for acknowledging and resolving complaints, and students can be invited to attend meetings of the Student Complaints Committee to discuss their complaint. Complaints are acknowledged within two working days and considered by the Student Complaints Committee within five working days followed by a written response within five working days; this allows for the prompt resolution of complaints. Any student who attends a meeting of the Student Complaints Committee can bring a representative of their choosing (including other students and family members), creating a supportive environment for students submitting complaints. If a student is dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint, they can ask to meet with the Student Committee to work collaboratively to achieve a mutually agreeable outcome. It is positive that students are invited to work in partnership to achieve an amicable solution.

78 If this is unsuccessful, students can request a meeting with the Principal and a member of the Board of Trustees (usually the chair), within five working days of the meeting with the Student Complaints Committee. It is clear there is a process for instances where students are dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaints, and all stages of the process are easy to understand. If a learner remains dissatisfied with the outcome, they may escalate to the UoC's complaint procedure, providing an external check on the BST procedures. After this process is finished they can raise their concerns with the Northern Ireland Public Service Ombudsman (NIPSO); this is clearly communicated to learners in the complaints policy. Complaints procedures are detailed in writing and in a flowchart, providing a range of different ways for students to learn about the complaint's procedure. The complaints procedure operates in line with guidance provided by the NIPSO.

79 The review team heard that one complaint had been received in the last three academic sessions. The recent complaint was initially considered by a panel from BST convened by the Head of Education and was subsequently escalated to the UoC complaints procedure. At the time of the review the complaint was going through the University's complaints procedure.

80 Academic appeals are dealt with using the UoC appeals procedure. Students are supported by staff where necessary to support in navigating the appeals process. There have been no appeals in the last three years.

81 Overall, the review team concluded that Belfast School of Theology has an easy to

navigate procedure for dealing with complaints, appeals and operational concerns. The small scale of the School means that there are very few instances where feedback becomes a formal complaint. Despite this, there are suitable, well-advertised procedures in place with several stages to support students who wish to make a complaint. The Belfast School of Theology is **aligned** with the Sector-Agreed Principle.

Enhancement initiatives

Commentary on institutional approach to enhancement

82 The Belfast School of Theology demonstrates a clear and developing commitment to enhancement in relation to the student learning experience. This commitment is embedded within its strategic planning, governance structures, and operational practices. At the strategic level, the School's 2021–2026 Strategic Plan outlines a vision for academic development, quality assurance, and student engagement. The School's planned relocation to the Stranmillis University College campus reflects a proactive approach to enhancing the student experience through improved facilities, financial sustainability, and community integration.

83 Enhancement is operationalised through the Education Committee, which plays a leading role in monitoring academic standards and quality. Although the committee's reporting lines were initially unclear, revised Terms of Reference are being implemented to clarify its relationship with the Board of Directors. This structural refinement will support a more coherent and accountable approach to quality enhancement.

84 The School's approach to enhancement is also evident in its commitment to student partnership. Students are actively involved in feedback mechanisms, including surveys, open forums, and representation on key committees. Feedback is routinely actioned, and students are informed of outcomes, fostering a culture of responsiveness and co-creation.

85 The School's use of data to inform enhancement is developing. While qualitative and quantitative data are collected and discussed, the review team recommends a more systematic and strategic use of analytics to support student progression and retention (see page.3). This represents a key area for future enhancement.

86 Externally, the School benefits from a strong partnership with the UoC, which provides validation, external examiner oversight, and quality assurance frameworks. This relationship supports continuous improvement through formal and informal feedback loops.

87 In summary, the School's institutional approach to enhancement includes strategic intent, inclusive governance, and a growing culture of evidence-based decision-making. While some areas, such as the development of standalone strategies for Quality Assurance and Learning, Teaching and Assessment require further attention, the School demonstrates a deliberate and holistic commitment to enhancing the student learning experience.

QAA2982 – R14743 - August 25

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