



This review method
is ESG-compliant

Educational Oversight Review

Irish Baptist College

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

- Dr Gareth Longden
- Dr Fiona Thompson
- Matthew Kitching (student reviewer).

The QAA Officer for this review was Dr Irene Ainsworth.

In Educational Oversight Review, 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 meets the Home Office's quality assurance requirements for educational oversight (Core component) or is fully aligned with the Sector-Agreed Principles of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Full component).

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

Founded in Dublin in 1892 before moving to Belfast in 1964 and then to its present purpose-built premises in Moira, County Down in 2003, the Irish Baptist College (IBC) is the training department of the Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland (ABCI), which comprises 122 churches throughout Ireland. The College's core mission is the provision of training for Christian service and particularly pastoral ministry in the ABCI. The College also prepares training for other denominations. The training provided is designed to prepare students to pursue their vocation in a range of areas including pastoral ministry, mission, youth work, teaching and theological research, at home and internationally.

The Irish Baptist College has four strategic aims, namely the provision of a regular supply of pastoral candidates for the churches of the ABCI; degree-level training for ministerial candidates who may not have degree-level training based in Ireland; training students for Christian ministry opportunities in Ireland and overseas; and providing at least 70 Christian workers for churches and other organisations over a 10-year period ending in 2027.

The last review of the Irish Baptist College was undertaken in March 2021, since which time it has implemented a structure for monitoring and developing individual staff members through peer observation and staff appraisal, developed an academic appeals procedure and put in place a formal process for postgraduate students to contribute fully to the enhancement process. The College was subject to monitoring in March 2022 and March 2023 with the latter report noting the College had established an initial agreement with a new validating partner, Spurgeon's College, London following a decision by its then awarding body, the University of Chester, to cease validation arrangements at IBC in August 2023. The March 2023 report noted that the Irish Baptist College was making commendable progress in continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the March 2022 monitoring report.

The six-year validation agreement between the Irish Baptist College and Spurgeon's College, London came into effect in September 2023 for two undergraduate programmes, namely the Bachelor of Divinity (BD) and Bachelor of Theology (BTh), and a Master of Theology (MTh) postgraduate programme. Following consideration of the Irish Baptist College's 2024 annual return to QAA and, taking into account the outcome of the March 2023 monitoring visit report and the scheduling of a full review in 2025, QAA confirmed that no monitoring visit was required in 2024.

The Irish Baptist College appointed a new Principal in May 2024 and the new agreement has led to changes in the governance structure and the provision of additional administrative resource to support the validation agreement with Spurgeon's College.

The Irish Baptist College has six full-time and two part-time members of staff, including five teaching staff and three administrative staff. It has 24 undergraduate students (19 full-time and five part-time) and 19 part-time postgraduate students. Recruitment, finance and research present key challenges for the College given its particular theological focus and the implications of this for potential levels of interest. The College's income is mainly derived from student fees, church donations, personal gifts and trust giving. As a smaller institution, providing a research environment for staff and students and time for teaching staff to be research-active is challenging, but the College's partnership with Spurgeon's College and its relationship with the Union Theological College, Belfast provide opportunities for staff and students to develop their research interests.

In reaching conclusions about the extent to which the Irish Baptist College meets the Sector-Agreed Principles, the QAA review team followed the evidence-based review procedure as outlined in the guidance for Educational Oversight Review (January 2025). The College provided the review team with a self-evaluation and supporting evidence. During the review

visit, which took place from 20 to 22 May 2025, the review team held a total of seven meetings with the College Principal, senior staff and members of the Management Committee, a Link Tutor, students, academic staff including a visiting lecturer, placement providers and professional support staff.

In summary, the team found two examples of good practice and was able to identify some recommendations for improvement.

Conclusions

The QAA review team reached the following conclusions about the higher education provision at the Irish Baptist College.

Full component

The QAA review team determines that the Irish Baptist College:

- **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 integrated framework and personalised approach to the delivery of high-quality teaching and learning **(Sector-Agreed Principle 3)**
- The integrated framework and personalised approach to the provision of student support. **(Sector-Agreed Principle 10)**

Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations**:

- Strengthen the College's approach to developing action plans based on student feedback and ensuring the feedback loop is closed. **(Sector-Agreed Principle 2)**
- Provide General Data Protection Regulation training so that all staff are aware of their responsibilities. **(Sector-Agreed Principle 4)**
- Establish a systematic approach to the collection and analysis of data, both qualitative and quantitative, to inform enhancement activities. **(Sector-Agreed Principle 4)**
- Ensure entry criteria for all programmes are communicated clearly and accessibly in published information. **(Sector-Agreed Principle 9)**
- Extend the diversity of assessment tasks to ensure that students are provided with tasks that prepare them well for their intended careers. **(Sector-Agreed Principle 11)**

Financial sustainability, management and governance

QAA has taken assurance that the financial sustainability, management and governance (FSMG) of the provider has been undertaken through the Department for the Economy specific course designation check.

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

1.1 The awarding bodies (currently Spurgeon's College with some teach out with the University of Chester), are responsible for academic quality and standards, with the Irish Baptist College (IBC or the College hereafter) actively involved in all processes, for example, monitoring and evaluation of activity at different levels of the College to ensure the maintenance of standards and quality enhancement. After the University of Chester advised IBC that it was withdrawing from the partnership, for strategic reasons, IBC took a considered approach in finding a new partner that would effectively support its vision to provide graduate pastors and missionaries for the Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland (ABCI) churches. The effective partnership with Spurgeon's College, an evangelical college which trains individuals for Christian mission, ministry and leadership, is evident through the partnership approval and validation processes, involving external input, leading to the approval of two undergraduate programmes (BD and BTh) and the postgraduate programme (MTh).

1.2 IBC's Academic Governance Framework provides a structured approach to securing academic standards and quality enhancement through ABCI's Executive Committee, the College Management Committee which is answerable to ABCI's Churches' Council; the Board of Studies; and the recently constituted Academic Quality Assurance Committee (AQAC) which is a sub-committee of the Board of Studies.

1.3 As the College is the training department for the ABCI, the Association Churches' Council elects 12 members of the College Management Committee to ensure accountability to the ABCI. The Board of Studies has overall responsibility for the strategic development of the academic aspects of the College, with the Management Team responsible for the day-to-day operations. The strategic nature of discussions at the Board of Studies is evident through the Terms of Reference and the minutes, where assurance on all aspects of academic governance is considered, including student feedback. The College is overseen by the Management Committee, the governing body of the College with responsibility for its strategic direction.

1.4 Externality is built into the approach to managing quality and standards in a variety of ways, including the external examiner process, the Academic Link Tutor at Spurgeon's College, and through AQAC which is responsible for examining the quality of all programmes offered at the College). AQAC includes external expertise (in the form of at least two external members who may be external members of the Board of Studies), as does the Board of Studies with normally 'two representatives of wider academic life'.

1.5 Through regular monitoring and evaluation, IBC is able to assure itself and others of the quality of academic standards, as well as seeking opportunities for enhancement. Recent examples include making changes to programmes, which includes addressing feedback from students, through the Spurgeon's College modifications process. External monitoring includes the QAA annual monitoring process, the review processes of the awarding body, and the appointment of an external examiner.

1.6 Overall, the review team concluded that the governance and quality management arrangements in place enable the Irish Baptist College to take a strategic approach to the management of quality and standards, notwithstanding that the internal committee structure is relatively new. The Irish Baptist College 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

2.1 Senior staff informed the review team that IBC has developed its student engagement system over a period of several years. The College has established Student Engagement Guidelines that codify student membership of committees and student feedback mechanisms. Students now have representation on a range of college committees, including the Management Committee, Board of Studies and AQAC. The team confirmed this with students and found that representation at committees was supplemented by further mechanisms designed to gather information on the student experience, including module and end-of-year feedback, and the establishment of Student Voice and Postgraduate Forum Committees.

2.2 Members of the Student Voice Committee are elected from among the student body and their views are actively sought from College staff. Students informed the team that they are regularly encouraged to complete module feedback. The sample size for module feedback is small but the team found that results are presented in a clear accessible format and are broadly positive. The College also makes use of more innovative means of gathering student feedback, for instance by asking students to write reflective accounts for the website or magazine.

2.3 IBC reflects on student feedback at regular staff meetings and the annual Staff Away Day, as well as within committees themselves. Minutes of the Staff Away Day confirm that student feedback is a standing item. The Self-Evaluation Document stated that the College closes the feedback loop, in relation to any action taken in response to feedback, by providing updates to the Student Voice Committee. However, while the student submission confirmed that students consider that the College listens to them, it also stated that they would like to see improved communication surrounding how feedback is acted upon. Notwithstanding this, the College provided the team with several examples of action taken in response to student feedback. This included improvements to facilities and work to address overlap in content in modules on conduct of worship, professional placement and leadership by making greater use of guest lectures from professional practitioners.

2.4 Scrutiny of the Postgraduate Forum minutes shows a considered discussion of student feedback. However, the connection to action planning is less demonstrable and the minutes lack specific, timebound actions that are assigned to teams or individual members of staff. Minutes of the Student Voice Committee demonstrated a similar approach and considered discussion of student feedback but with a failure to routinely translate feedback in action. The team therefore **recommends** that the College strengthen its approach to developing action plans based on student feedback and ensuring the feedback loop closed.

2.5 Overall, the review team concluded that the Irish Baptist College, notwithstanding the need to strengthen action planning processes, has a suitable range of mechanisms in place to engage students as active partners in assuring and enhancing the quality of the student learning experience. These are communicated clearly, and students are aware of the methods for providing feedback. The Irish Baptist College 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

3.1 IBC makes use of modern, purpose-built premises which it shares with the ABCI. The premises include student accommodation, teaching rooms, study spaces, social spaces, a library which holds more than 13,000 items, and a study annex. The College has recently upgraded its wi-fi provision and all teaching rooms are provided with high-speed wi-fi and audio-visual equipment. Students indicated that they were satisfied with the premises and the IT infrastructure. In addition to the investment in wi-fi the College has also invested significantly in other infrastructure, for example, the parking facilities, which was undertaken in response to student feedback. The review team found that IBC's premises were of high-quality and effectively support student learning.

3.2 The library is located on site and students expressed their appreciation of the range of resources available and found them to be wholly appropriate to support their learning. Although the student submission had noted that some resources were outdated, students who met the team were positive about the range and currency of resources. IBC has recently decided to invest in an e-book resource to facilitate access to such provision for students, particularly postgraduate students. The review team received an explanation of the deliberative process that led to the investment decision. This illustrated the careful approach to planning undertaken by IBC to invest in student learning, even though the financial cost was recognised as substantial. Students who had accessed the new resource were appreciative of the College's investment. The library catalogue is accessible through IBC's website. Since students do not have access to the library resources of Spurgeon's College, the ongoing planning and investment into IBC's resources was seen by the team as an important way to ensure that there is ongoing access to high-quality learning resources.

3.3 IBC assesses the potential risks to learning resources through the use of a risk register which is discussed at the Management Committee. The use of a risk register is a proportionate and effective way to track changing scale of risks to IBC and propose remedies. The review team considered that IBC's approach to identifying the competing need for resources, and the risks to those resources, to be indicative of a systematic and strategic approach to ensuring that appropriate learning resources are available.

3.4 The transition from the University of Chester to Spurgeon's College resulted in IBC having to invest in a new Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) provider. Recognising that the use of a new VLE would place pressures on both staff and students, IBC strengthened its administrative base to, in part, support the College's transition and to support staff and student learning. Noting that students and staff were appreciative of the effectiveness of the support provided, the review team considered the planning and allocation of additional resource needs to be indicative of a thoughtful and student-focussed approach to ensuring that appropriate resources are available.

3.5 IBC has a small staff team comprising five core teaching staff and three administrative staff. The College also makes use of specialist visiting staff to augment the teaching team. The teaching staff are well qualified and all hold PhDs and are research active. The curricula vitae of staff who teach on the Spurgeon's College programmes are submitted to Spurgeon's College's Academic Director for approval.

3.6 The Management Committee has a strategic responsibility to ensure that all staff are supported to meet their potential. It achieves this through the use of appraisal every two years where additional training needs are identified. Teaching staff are further supported through the peer review of teaching which also applies to visiting staff. This process also serves to assure IBC of the quality of the teaching that is delivered. IBC monitors the peer review process through the Management Committee.

3.7 IBC teaching staff are also able to undertake a period of sabbatical. for example, to write a book. Staff who met the team appreciated the support provided by the College to enable them to develop either as academics or as professional support staff. Staff spoke about the ability to attend conferences, workshops, and training events, and recognised the supportive environment which exists within the College which helps them to undertake their roles. The review team recognised the strength of the whole staff team and saw this as a particular strength of IBC's offering in the support of student learning. The review team considers that the integrated framework and personalised approach to the delivery of high-quality teaching and learning is **good practice**.

3.8 Overall, the review team concluded that IBC has physical facilities that are wholly appropriate to the delivery of teaching and learning and effectively support the College's mission. The library resources are also appropriate for the courses offered and the decision to purchase a subscription to online library resources shows that IBC are continuing to make good progress in planning and securing resources. The staff team are appropriately qualified, highly skilled, and are well-supported in their roles by the College. The Irish Baptist College 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

4.1 IBC adheres to the ABCI Data Protection Policy, which provides guidance on compliance with data laws, and the ABCI Data Privacy Notice is available on the College website. Students are made aware of IBC's approach to data through the application process where it also forms part of the Terms and Conditions for Programmes of Study, and to current students, via the Student Handbook. IBC also must comply with the requirements of Spurgeon's College, as detailed in Schedule 1 of the validation agreement. The sharing of necessary data with the awarding body is managed in line with Spurgeon's College's Collaborative Handbook.

4.2 Personal and academic data relating to students are securely stored on the VLE with administrators trained in how to input and store data for College purposes. Staff are made aware of how their data are stored via the ABCI Handbook of HR Policies. The College does not systematically provide training for staff in General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the review team therefore **recommends** that IBC provide GDPR training so that all staff are aware of their responsibilities.

4.3 IBC collects, analyses and uses data in a number of ways. Attainment data are considered at the Progression and Awards Board and the analysis of such data has been enhanced through the partnership with Spurgeon's College such that both attainment and progression data are analysed at module and programme level. Attainment data is also considered at the Board of Studies and at the Management Committee. In addition, the analysis of data forms an integral aspect of annual monitoring, covering student recruitment, retention, progression, and achievement.

4.4 A secure process is used to collect anonymous feedback from students on induction, study skills and individual modules which is considered throughout the committee structure and discussed with student representatives at the Student Voice Committee. Changes have been made in response to feedback on modules and facilities have been upgraded and are appreciated by students.

4.5 The size and culture of IBC provides a richness of qualitative feedback through formal committees and student meetings as well as informal opportunities through operating an open-door policy. Students were positive about their access to members of staff and the availability of opportunities to provide feedback. Notwithstanding the opportunities available for qualitative feedback and, whilst recognising the limitations of quantitative data collection for small cohorts, the review team **recommends** that IBC establish a systematic approach to the collection and analysis of data, both qualitative and quantitative, to inform enhancement activities.

4.6 Overall, the review team concluded that the Irish Baptist College uses data to inform and evaluate quality. Quantitative data is used primarily for assessment analysis, with qualitative data driving enhancements. Students are encouraged to feedback formally and informally. The Irish Baptist College 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

5.1 IBC monitors and reviews its provision for the purpose of ensuring and enhancing its academic standards and quality. It does this in a number of ways, all of which are appropriate for a provider of IBC's size and specialised nature. Unlike larger providers it does not extensively gather, nor rely significantly upon the analysis of, quantitative data given that such data is likely to be of little statistical significance, although there are plans to explore ways in which quantitative data may eventually contribute to the monitoring process. The approach that IBC has adopted is to rely more upon qualitative data, input from expert opinion, and opportunities for reflection, both formal and informal, from student and tutor feedback. This approach was one that the review team found was most likely to produce meaningful actions, for example, module changes following student feedback.

5.2 Students are involved in monitoring and reviewing provision through various mechanisms. First, module feedback provides a direct assessment of the current provision. Similar feedback is gathered in the Student Voice Committee and the Postgraduate Forum. The module feedback and the minutes of the student meetings are then considered at the Board of Studies. The Board of Studies, which meets three times a year, is a sub-committee of the Management Committee and thus provides a direct route for the student feedback to the senior academic decision-making body within IBC. Second, the presence of student members on the Management Committee, the Board of Studies, and AQAC also gives confidence that students have the opportunity to contribute their views on academic standards and quality and therefore inform the monitoring and evaluation of provision.

5.3 IBC also hold an Annual Review meeting which provides a further opportunity to systematically review all provision, evaluate changes to modules, and reflect on student feedback against the wider context of the College. This meeting provides a valuable opportunity to take a strategic view over IBC's progress and priorities. For a small and specialised provider this is a sensible and proportionate way in which to assess provision.

5.4 Staff are involved in the monitoring and review of current provision through the peer review of teaching process and through their engagement in the Staff Away Day. Members of staff who met the team articulated how they are also able to continually monitor provision through the weekly staff meetings where core staff are able to discuss modules, student achievement, and student feedback. IBC, rightly in the view of the review team, considers that ongoing discussion is an effective way to monitor provision and address potential issues as soon as they arise. Students commented on the responsiveness of the staff team to issues that they raised, often informally, about academic provision.

5.5 IBC also draws upon external expertise to monitor and review its provision. The introduction of externality takes a number of forms. Spurgeon's College appoint an external examiner who reviews the programmes and the student work. External examiner reports confirm the overall quality of the provision and IBC's ongoing engagement with the reports to enhance their provision, for example in shifting away from providing formulaic feedback and making more transparent the process of moderation. The appointment of a link tutor by Spurgeon's College also provides a way in which IBC can integrate an element of externality into their review of their provision. The review team met the link tutor who explained how the role provides a means to monitor academic quality and standards and to enhance provision,

for example, by the provision of advice about the restructuring of a module that students had expressed concern about.

5.6 IBC has integrated externality into its committee structures, for example, on the Board of Studies and AQAC. Some of the external members on the Board of Studies have a role within the wider ABCI and offer a useful perspective on the needs of the churches. This is particularly important for IBC as many students are preparing for ministerial work within those churches. The external members of AQAC bring with them wider experience of higher education and are usually appointed for a period of three years. Given that both committees have a complementary responsibility for monitoring academic standards and the delivery of the programmes, the presence of external members is an important additional way in which IBC seeks to monitor and enhance its provision.

5.7 In addition to the internal processes of monitoring and evaluation of provision, IBC also engages in the review mechanisms of Spurgeon's College. The IBC Principal oversees the production of the annual undergraduate and postgraduate Indicative Collaborative Programmes Annual Review Report. This report explores a range of programme related topics, including the evaluation of changes to the programme, assessment, resources, and future plans. The report provides an additional mechanism by which both IBC and Spurgeon's College can be assured that provision is being formally reviewed and an actionable plan is developed. The review team were assured, that in addition to IBC's internal mechanisms, this external process of monitoring and assessment, represents a robust contribution to securing academic standards and quality.

5.8 Overall, the review team concluded that IBC's focus on student feedback, facilitating student and external engagement in the committee structures, as well as staff involvement, indicate that IBC has appropriate structures in place to monitor, review, and enhance its provision. The terms of reference of the committees and their minutes demonstrate that the structures are functioning effectively and support IBC to enhance its provision. In addition to these internal processes, IBC also engages with the review mechanisms required by Spurgeon's College, namely the appointment of the external examiner, the link tutor and the production of an annual report. The Irish Baptist College 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

6.1 IBC actively participates in external scrutiny and review and recognises its value, despite the burden this can place on small institutions. Such scrutiny generates enhancement opportunities that are deemed to be an essential and important part of development for the College. For example, engaging effectively with the QAA Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) process led to improvements in the peer observation process and the staff appraisal process; the clarification of relevant information about academic appeals, distinct from complaints in the student handbooks; and the introduction of a Postgraduate Student Forum. Subsequent monitoring reports have confirmed progress against these three recommendations.

6.2 As a consequence of the validation process undertaken with Spurgeon's College, IBC has increased external expertise on committees with external expertise on the Board of Studies, AQAC and the Progression and Awards Board, which is chaired by a representative of the awarding body and includes the external examiner as a member. Whilst the new structures are still bedding in, IBC noted that these new members have provided useful insights to discussions through their experience elsewhere in the sector.

6.3 IBC also engages effectively with Spurgeon's College's programme annual review process (and previous annual monitoring as required by the University of Chester). The Spurgeon's College appointed external examiner provides a report that is used to enhance the student experience, including the introduction of an assessment feedback form to complement the extensive feedback provided within each assignment by providing feed forward comments. As well as their scrutiny of the assessment process, the external examiner also comments on proposed modifications to the programme, as required by Spurgeon's College.

6.4 As this is the training college for the ABCI, IBC can draw on a range of expertise from within that community, reflected in the membership of the Management Committee, which acts as the governing body. IBC also reports to the ABCI's Executive Committee and Churches Council twice a year.

6.5 Overall, the review team concluded that the Irish Baptist College engages effectively with external review, using such reviews as formal opportunities to evaluate and enhance provision. The Irish Baptist College therefore is **aligned** with the Sector-Agreed Principle.

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

7.1 Whilst in partnership with the University of Chester, the 2021 QAA HER (Alternative Providers) review judged that IBC met UK Expectations as defined by the UK Quality Code for Higher Education 2018. Spurgeon's College, as the current awarding body, is responsible for academic quality and standards, including processes for the approval and modification of provision. Through following the processes laid out in the Spurgeon's College Collaborative Partner Handbook (Validation), IBC ensures that the quality of provision and the academic standards are consistent with relevant frameworks. Programme specifications reference the appropriate Subject Benchmark Statement (SBS) and include extensive mapping of intended learning outcomes and curriculum against the SBS. Programme Learning Outcomes and Module Learning Outcomes reflect the taxonomy of the FHEQ.

7.2 Spurgeon's College appoints the external examiner based on nominations from IBC. The external examiner's annual report is not only an assurance of standards, but it is used to inform and enhance the undergraduate and postgraduate provision through, for example the introduction of a feedback form that provides feed forward comments as well as feedback to complement the extensive notes provided on assignments.

7.3 IBC designs and develops its provision, drawing on external and internal input, including student consultation, before approval is granted via a rigorous process by Spurgeon's College. The validation approval panel includes external scrutiny and the production of a report with recommendations. Modifications to provision are also managed through a rigorous process, drawing on external and student input.

7.4 Relevant documents, including programme and module handbooks, are available to students via the VLE. Programme handbooks provide detailed marking criteria and information on the achievement of awards. Information on how the final classification is calculated is in the Spurgeon's College Degree Regulations. Students are advised of the classification calculation in their end of semester reviews and, from September 2025, this information will be included in the programme handbooks.

7.5 IBC seeks to provide an inclusive learning and working environment where they design, develop, approve and modify programmes that align with policies to include all. The programmes are assessed predominantly through written tasks, including essays, reflective essays, critical reviews, as well as presentations, with students usually given a choice between two assessment titles or, at postgraduate levels, developing assessments around their own particular areas of interest, as well as set tasks. The student submission and the Spurgeon's College validation panel minutes indicate that assessment tasks could be more diverse, and this would support a more inclusive approach. This is referred to in Principle 11.

7.6 The Assessment Policy and Procedure outlines the approach taken to inclusivity, including flexibility to allow adjustments to overcome any substantial disadvantage that individual students could experience, whilst maintaining standards. For students experiencing particular issues during their course, IBC has a process for providing support, as outlined in the Mitigating Circumstances Policy. Students are advised of this process via

Induction Week and/or the Study Skills module and they are encouraged to seek help if they experience any difficulties with their assessments. Through the admissions process candidates are invited to self-declare any disability or specific learning needs so that the College can make any reasonable adjustments required.

7.7 Overall, the review team concluded that the Irish Baptist College engages effectively with the awarding body in designing, developing, approving and modifying programmes, drawing on internal and external input that provides focussed learning opportunities appropriate to its mission. The Irish Baptist College 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

8.1 IBC has two academic partnership arrangements in place, the first with Spurgeon's College and the second, currently in teach-out, with the University of Chester. The Spurgeon's College partnership is for the delivery of the Bachelor of Divinity and the Bachelor of Theology programmes and a Postgraduate programme (Master of Theology) which include provision for intermediate/exit awards. The Spurgeon's College programmes were approved in a validation event held in May 2023 following a due diligence process conducted by Spurgeon's College and the consideration of a programme proposal submission from IBC.

8.2 At the time of review there were two students remaining on the University of Chester programme. These two students continue to be supported by both the University and IBC and their academic progress is monitored through IBC's committee structures although inevitably IBC has found that the changing relationship with the University has made their shared interaction more difficult. Nevertheless, the review team found that IBC has a proper focus on the ongoing wellbeing and academic experience for these two students.

8.3 The validation agreement with Spurgeon's College is for a period of six years and came into effect from June 2023. The agreement clearly sets out the responsibilities and expectations of both parties towards each other and to students. It also sets out the expectations relating to registration, assessment, programme monitoring and review, complaints and appeals, quality and standards, and staffing. Schedule 2 of the agreement sets out the data that Spurgeon's College requires IBC to maintain and to have available for audit. The review team learned that these data requirements are likely to become more extensive in future but that Spurgeon's College were already in discussions with IBC about what this would mean. The validation agreement is clear and comprehensive and sets out effectively the roles and responsibilities of both parties.

8.4 The agreement is supplemented by an annual Collaboration Delivery Plan which operationalises the agreement by providing a clear delineation of the programme-related tasks under the headings of Programme Quality Management, Programme Learning Infrastructure, and Programme Delivery. This document effectively sets out the division of responsibility and tasks between the two parties in a transparent manner. In addition to the delivery plan, Spurgeon's College also provide a Collaborative Partner Handbook (Validation). This provides further information for partners on the operationalisation of the partnership through an explanation of the key processes and policies that underpin the validation agreement. These include, for example, the arrangements for annual and periodic review; the process for making changes to programmes; and the external examiner and link tutor roles. Collectively, these three documents, the validation agreement, the Collaboration Delivery Plan, and the Collaborative Partner Handbook (Validation) set out the basis for the partnership, the division of responsibilities, and the processes which structure the partnership in a way that is effective, transparent, and comprehensive.

8.5 Information about the partnership is shared effectively with students. Communication takes the form of references to Spurgeon's College being included in key documents, for example the offer letter, the student handbook, the programme handbooks, and in marketing documents. Spurgeon's College also has to approve marketing materials which make use of its name or logo.

8.6 Governance of the partnership is operationalised from IBC's perspective through its own programme management and governance structures. The primary vehicles for this are IBC's committees and boards, specifically the College Management Committee, the Senior Management Team, the Finance and Staffing Committee, the Board of Studies, and AQAC. Together the terms of reference for these groups and their minutes demonstrate how IBC manage and monitor the partnership. The terms of reference are clear and together represent a structured approach to the management of the partnership in regard to strategy and operationalisation, the student experience, and academic quality. The minutes of these groups demonstrate a systematic consideration of these areas of responsibility that is in line with the terms of reference and what would be expected in the effective management of a partnership.

8.7 The Management Committee formally considers risks associated with governance, operational matters, personnel, finance, education, and external factors by employing a risk register. This is a thorough yet proportionate approach to partnership management and one which gives confidence in IBC's approach to their partnership.

8.8 The partnership is further supported by areas of responsibility that are reserved by Spurgeon's College and to which IBC contribute. These include the appointment of an external examiner, the approval of teaching staff, the appointment of a link tutor, Spurgeon's College's retention of the chairing responsibility for the Progression and Award Board, and the requirement for IBC to engage in annual and periodic review.

8.9 Overall, the review team concluded that the combination of Spurgeon's College's robust approach to the validation process, the clear division of responsibilities between Spurgeon's College and IBC, the reservation of some key responsibilities, the requirement to engage in annual and periodic review, allied with IBC's own internal committee structures and compliance with the terms of the validation agreement gives confidence to the team that the academic standards of the programmes are secure and the partnership provides opportunities for the provision to be enhanced. The Irish Baptist College 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

9.1 IBC has an established Admissions Policy that it considers helps ensure that admissions are reliable, fair and inclusive. The Admissions Committee, ordinarily chaired by the Principal or Director of Training, oversees the operation of the policy. The policy is supplemented by Admissions Protocols for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, and IBC has recently approved its Accreditation of Prior Learning Policy.

9.2 Each application is reviewed on an individual basis, as many applicants have not followed a traditional route into higher education. Therefore, together with consideration of academic achievement, account is taken of life experience, service, professional or spiritual life/activity, and suitable references. The self-evaluation document indicated that this may mean that applicants are offered a course which is not their initial choice.

9.3 The review team found that admission criteria for the undergraduate Preparation for Ministry programme were clearly stated on the IBC website. Criteria include at least two A Levels (grade C or above), a conviction to God's call on your life, and an indication of an ability to meet the fees, among others. However, the team found that the entry criteria and process for the Master in Theology degree, lacked clarity on the website. The team therefore **recommends** that the College ensure entry criteria for all programmes are communicated clearly and accessibly in published information.

9.4 Students applying to undergraduate programmes must attend an interview and provide written and verbal presentations, in addition to completing the application form. Postgraduate students complete a similar process, with the exception of the written and verbal presentation. IBC has a series of standardised interview questions and answers are recorded on a template. Staff and students confirmed that applicants are encouraged to declare additional learning needs or disabilities during the process.

9.5 The self-evaluation document stated that 'staff will speak with students who have been offered a place regarding the appropriate programme, mode of study and module choices' followed by a review twice a year for the duration of a student's programme of study. IBC attests that the low dropout rate indicates that this process is suitable in selecting students who are capable of sustaining the chosen course of study.

9.6 Overall, the review team concluded that there are clear regulations governing admissions at the Irish Baptist College. Students have access to a range of support to assist them with their application and confirm that queries are responded to promptly. The Irish Baptist College 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

10.1 IBC has a range of mechanisms in place to provide student support. These include a personal tutor system, study skills sessions, open office hours, and access to a professional counsellor. The review team heard that students are provided with information about student support during induction and in the student handbook. Information in the handbook includes reference to IBC's Pastoral Care Policy, including an emphasis on peer-to-peer care. The team found that the handbook provides limited information to students about the wider range of student support services available and this was confirmed by students. However, the small and relational nature of the College helps to ensure that all students are aware of, and are able to access, the available support.

10.2 All undergraduate students are assigned a personal tutor at the beginning of the year. Tutor groups meet on a weekly basis. Individual appointments with the tutor are left to the discretion of the students. Students confirmed to the team that tutorials support wellbeing, personal formation and progression and serve as an opportunity to cascade important information. A twice-yearly informal discussion is also held with the tutor and another staff member to update on holistic progress towards the end of each semester. In addition to tutorial provision, the use of pre-progression and progression boards, and the involvement of the awarding body help to ensure that IBC has a scaffolded approach to student support that aids progression. The team heard that the College has enhanced its data collection capacity and therefore IBC's ability to track student progress.

10.3 In addition to the available pastoral support, IBC provides study skills as orientation sessions and for postgraduate courses as an integrated module. Sessions include reading skills, using the internet and referencing, essay writing, academic integrity, critical thinking and guidance on writing an exegetical essay. IBC also runs a dissertation preparation day, designed to help students consider arrangements for their final piece of assessment. Feedback from students on the study skills provided during induction and as part of a module is positive.

10.4 The review team heard about IBC's collaborative approach to resolving issues related to a recent change in its VLE provider. Students reported that they had found the transition challenging but valued the additional staff support that was organised to help mitigate the change. Further support includes residential accommodation on campus, including for international students, immigration assistance, and support from a term-time librarian. IBC also runs an annual summer school, which students confirmed was beneficial and provided them with direct exposure to academics and practitioners whose work they had encountered during their studies. The team considers that the integrated framework and personalised approach to student support is a feature of **good practice**.

10.5 Staff confirmed that they receive appropriate training and professional development to help discharge their responsibilities effectively. This has included sessions on student loans, the VLE and Home Office requirements.

10.6 Overall, the review team concluded that the Irish Baptist College provides a wide range of appropriate support services. In particular, pastoral support at the College is a strength that effectively supports the student experience. Staff receive suitable training and

support services are subject to feedback and monitoring. The Irish Baptist College 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

11.1 The College aims to challenge students incrementally as they progress through their programmes using a scaffolding framework encompassing the concepts of support and independent learning. The values and principles that inform IBC's approach to teaching, learning, and assessment are set out in the programme handbooks. The programme specifications included in the handbooks also describe how programme design, structure, support, delivery, integration of academic and professional outcomes, collaboration with students, and assessment are aligned to produce a distinctively IBC approach to teaching, learning, and assessment. Members of staff effectively described this vision. The programme specifications provide a comprehensive student-focussed body of information that serve to support a student throughout their programme of study. The programme specifications are available to students on the VLE and students confirmed that they had access to the resources they need. Summary information is also available in the Student Handbook which again students confirmed that they had received.

11.2 IBC has developed a detailed assessment policy which provides a clear account of key topics, including design, purpose, inclusivity, word length, alternative assessments, and penalties. The provision for alternative assessments for students with academic accommodations is described in the programme handbooks. Students have access to module learning outcomes and the assessment criteria as well as assessment rubrics. This information is all contained on the VLE and is available to students at the beginning of their studies. The review team considered that IBC's assessment policy is clear and concise because of the way in which it integrates the purpose and character of assessment with the ongoing academic and professional expectations of the students.

11.3 Decisions about the identification of assessment tasks are left to individual module leaders. The review team recognise that there is a clear value in subject experts identifying the best way to assess an individual module. However, a consequence of this, in the team's view, is that a strategic overview of the appropriateness of the overall assessment diet is not given sufficient consideration by the programme team.

11.4 IBC uses assessment tasks that are primarily text based and take the form of essays, exegetical exercises, and reflections. While these tasks clearly contribute to the students' preparedness for their future careers, the review team considered that a more strategic perspective on how assessment can prepare students for their careers would be more beneficial to the students, echoing a view expressed during the validation event with the validating body. In discussions with students it was noted, for example, that some students repeatedly chose particular types of essay because they were familiar with a certain format (e.g. exegesis) rather than develop a wider range of proficiencies. In addition to the encouragement given in the validation event, the review team noted that the student submission also encouraged IBC to diversify its assessment offering away from written text. The review team encourages IBC to move further in this direction to make assessment more diverse and authentic to the intended careers of students. The review team therefore **recommends** that IBC should extend the diversity of assessment tasks to ensure that students are provided with tasks that prepare them well for their intended careers.

11.5 IBC is aware of the importance of the role of academic integrity in ensuring academic standards. It has developed an Academic Integrity Policy, a copy of which is available on the website. This is a detailed and clear document which sets out expectations regarding academic integrity, provides helpful and student-focussed descriptions of different types of integrity issues, and provides information about how the process of identifying issues with academic integrity will be examined. It is also noteworthy that IBC take particular care to recognise the potential wellbeing effects of an accusation of an integrity issue for a student. IBC uses Turnitin to assess scripts for plagiarism. Students who met the review team were aware of the importance of academic integrity. Cases of academic misconduct are formally considered by a Special Cases Committee and are reported at AQAC meetings. IBC has also sought to address the challenges raised by the use of generative artificial intelligence through the development of guidelines on artificial intelligence.

11.6 Many of the students at IBC are intending to work within the community of Baptist Churches. The College is part of the ABCI and is able to arrange opportunities for students to participate within the life of the churches. This takes many forms and is clearly something of central importance to both IBC and the students. A key way in which the relationship is demonstrated is through the provision of placements at churches. Students spoke warmly of the opportunities that the placements provided and the representatives of the churches also valued the contribution that the students brought to their churches. The placement is integrated into the academic programme through the Professional Placement module, for which the assessment is based both upon work by the student and by a report from the placement supervisor. This is an innovative form of assessment and is a strength of the module and helps to integrate well the academic and the professional in an applied and authentic way. The review team recognised the value that the placement opportunities brought to the programmes and to the students' intended careers.

11.7 The external examiner has confirmed that the academic standards and student outcomes at IBC are comparable with those elsewhere. The examiner has also drawn attention to areas for improvement, for example, some feedback comments, were in the opinion of the examiner, too formulaic. Students who met the review team noted that they were now generally happy with the quality of their feedback but that it was still sometimes inconsistent between markers. They noted that feedback was received in a timely manner and was in line with stated timescales. IBC has moved away from formulaic responses in response to the examiner. The response, and the view of the students, illustrates how IBC has responded effectively to the issue and is a reflection, in the team's view, of the seriousness with which IBC responds to such issues.

11.8 Staff are supported to maintain the currency of the subject expertise through the opportunity to participate in conferences and workshops. The facility to undertake a period of sabbatical is also available and staff have used this opportunity to engage with significant pieces of research. Staff also reported that they had been supported by IBC to obtain fellowship of Advance HE. IBC also organises annual away days which provide the opportunity for discussion and training. The College supports all staff to maintain their subject expertise which is conducive to the delivery of high-quality teaching and learning.

11.9 Overall, the review team concluded that IBC provides a high-quality experience for students and one which supports them throughout their studies. It came to this view on the basis of the extensive information provided about students' programmes of study; the development of clear policies on assessment and academic integrity; the integration of academic and professional activities for students; and the support and opportunities offered to staff to continue to develop their pedagogic skills and for students to succeed and to achieve outcomes comparable with those achieved elsewhere. The Irish Baptist College therefore is **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

12.1 IBC has a complaints policy and procedure that is accessible through the website. The policy defines complaints and identifies a series of principles that must be adhered to when submitting and addressing complaints. The policy also addresses confidentiality, group and third-party complaints and anonymous complaints.

12.2 The policy establishes clear grounds for submitting a complaint and specifies issues that are not within the scope of the procedure. For example, complaints submitted after the permissible time period, malicious complaints and those that relate to academic judgement. It also excludes academic appeals, which are considered through a separate policy.

12.3 The complaints procedure includes three stages; informal, formal and a review stage. The review team determined that all stages of the procedure are clearly set out in the policy and subject to explicit timeframes. Where a complaint is not resolved informally, students can submit formal complaints to the Director of Training. In instances where further examination of the complaint is required, an Investigating Officer is appointed. Possible resolutions are also set out in the policy and appear fit-for-purpose. Reviews are considered by the Special Cases Committee, however, while the policy addresses the need to avoid conflicts of interest, it does not specify who is eligible to, or will, form the Special Cases Committee.

12.4 The policy also clarifies the role of the awarding body and students' right to representation throughout the process. The Director of Training submits an annual report on the number and nature of complaints to the Management Committee and the Student Voice Committee. To date, no formal complaints have been received or considered by the College.

12.5 Procedures for appeals regarding recruitment, selection and admission are available in the admissions protocols for the appropriate course. Applicants have four weeks from the date of the decision to appeal an admissions outcome. Appeals are considered by the Admission Committee. IBC has not received any appeals regarding admissions decisions.

12.6 IBC has an established academic appeals procedure that is accessible from the College website. The procedure sets out the grounds for academic appeals and the different stages involved in considering an appeal, including for group appeals. Appeals are submitted to the Registrar within 15 working days of the date of the Board of Studies. The Registrar conducts a prima facie review and, where there is evidence to suggest the grounds have been met, the Principal will refer the matter to an Appeals Board for their consideration. The procedure also states that, where a student remains dissatisfied, they can request a review by the awarding body and, where necessary, an independent review by the Office of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.

12.7 Overall, the review team concluded that the Irish Baptist College has established policies and procedures for complaints and appeals that are robust, fair, transparent, and clearly articulated to students and staff. The Irish Baptist College therefore is **aligned** with the Sector-Agreed Principle.

Enhancement initiatives

Commentary on institutional approach to enhancement

IBC has formal processes in place to ensure the systematic enhancement of the learning experience through its governance structure including the Executive Committee, College Management Committee, AQAC and the Board of Studies. The College engages in regular monitoring and evaluation to assure the quality of academic standards and to identify opportunities for enhancement and is subject to monitoring and review by external bodies including its validating body and QAA. There is externality in the membership of committees and the external examiner and link tutor appointed by the validating body provide further external points of reference to inform enhancement of the student learning experience.

The College is student-led and responsive to student needs identified through both formal and informal channels of communication, including the Student Voice Committee and an open-door policy exists enabling the College to gather qualitative feedback. Accepting the limitations of quantitative data analysis given the size of the College, a systematic approach to the collection and analysis of data, both qualitative and quantitative, would help to inform enhancement activities.

The College Principal and the Director of Training provide leadership in progressing IBC's quality assurance and enhancement agenda and the Principal has identified areas for enhancement including an improved summer school. It is clear that the College is receptive of, and responsive to, feedback from students about their learning experience.

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