



## Educational Oversight: desk-based analysis of the Free Church of Scotland t/a Edinburgh Theological Seminary, January 2022

### Outcome of the desk-based analysis

1 From the annual return and documentary evidence, the monitoring team concludes that the Edinburgh Theological Seminary (ETS; the Seminary) is continuing to maintain academic standards and the quality of student learning opportunities since the January 2021 [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).

### Changes since the last QAA review

2 There have been no significant changes in the management, course structure or accommodation at ETS since the Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER(AP)) in January 2021. There are currently 97 students undertaking courses at the Seminary: 61 undergraduate - 47 full-time equivalent; and 36 postgraduate - 21 full-time equivalent. ETS employs 21 staff, all but eight of whom are part-time. All courses continue to be validated and awarded by the University of Glasgow.

### Findings from the monitoring visit

3 The outcome of this desk-based review was reached after reading the Annual Monitoring Return and the accompanying evidence. The HER(AP) in January 2021 identified one area of good practice which the Seminary continues to develop (paragraph 4). The review also identified two recommendations, both of which have been addressed (paragraph 5).

4 ETS continues to develop its supportive pastoral relationships with all students. In-person classes have now recommenced after the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic were lifted. The initial restrictions affected the personal relationships between staff and students and within cohorts, but these are now much improved. A move to allow students to access their programmes through distance learning, for all or part of the programme, is balanced by the encouragement they receive to attend online in real time where they can interact with colleagues and staff directly. Students opting for this mode of delivery are expected to attend in-person for at least one week per semester, in addition to induction week, and to have regular contact with the Director of Studies using an online platform.

5 The recommendations detailed in the HER(AP) Review have both been addressed. A comprehensive Remote Learning Policy has now been published and is being implemented. This provides an opportunity for all students to undertake their programmes in full or part by distance learning. It further encourages occasional in-person attendance as well as real-time access to lectures. Provision is made for assessment where students are unable to attend on campus. This may be at an agreed venue with invigilation, or under strict instructions from the course organiser where 'Take Home' examinations have been arranged.

6 A formal structure for staff development has been implemented and published as the Staff Development Policy. This is summarised in the staff handbook. It provides an

opportunity for staff to attend appropriate courses and conferences, and the opportunity for sabbatical leave to pursue more in-depth development activities. An electronic log system has been introduced where staff can record the development activities they undertake and where they are asked to comment on their experience. This, and future development, is discussed at the staff appraisal which takes place bi-annually and is detailed in the Staff Appraisal Policy.

7 Progression and success data is reported to and discussed annually at the Board of Examiners and is generally good. Cohort sizes at the Seminary are small, so percentage data can be dramatically skewed by the actions of one individual. The impact of the restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic has directly resulted in the withdrawal of at least two students from the 2019-20 cohort of the Master of Theology in Missiology, due to changes in family circumstances or ill health. In other programmes for the same cohort, one student has transferred to a PhD programme, and another has deferred. Progression for the 2020-21 cohorts is 100% for all programmes except the full-time B.Th. programme where three students have withdrawn. Timely completion has been affected by students changing between full and part-time study. Those students who have completed their programmes have all achieved their award and of the 10 students completing in June 2021, three achieved Merit and the other seven all gained Distinction.

8 The pattern of enrolment on the BTh programmes has been fluctuating with full-time recruitments of seven (2018), 13 (2019), 11 (2020), and four (2021). Part-time enrolments are seven, five, nine and seven, respectively, for the corresponding years. Participation on the various MTh programmes shows a declining trend over the same period.

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

9 ETS is using the revised Quality Code for Higher Education effectively and has reviewed its practices and procedures to ensure that compliance with all relevant Core and Common practices is addressed in detail and can be evidenced. A restructure of the Senate with both external and student membership has been undertaken. This has also included the introduction of sub-groups with responsibility for distinct aspects of standards and quality who report directly to the Senate.

10 Working closely with the University of Glasgow, the use of Subject Benchmark Statements, the expectations of denominational boards, the expertise of external examiners and other external influences has assured the academic standards of the programmes offered. Programmes are formally validated by the University every five years. Preparation for the next validation during the next academic year is in progress.

11 Students are well supported at ETS. The digital publication of the clear and detailed suite of policies covering all aspects of the admissions process ensures they are well informed prior to enrolment. The detailed programme specifications and handbooks combined with the academic tutoring and Director of Studies, formal assessment feedback and learning resources all provide academic support. The policy for Accessible and Inclusive Learning provides an additional framework for support. Pastoral support is well developed with a close community ethos and peer support. The student representative committee has its own Student Pastoral Care Team who work with staff to provide peer support. In particular, they operate a 'buddy' system to help new students to integrate into seminary life. Information regarding support is provided in the student handbooks which are also published on the virtual learning platform.

12 Assessments are designed to offer the opportunity for all students to demonstrate and develop their skills. Oversight of assessment by the external examiners assures not only

academic standards but also the use of a range of assessment methods, the coverage of all learning objectives, and the opportunity to achieve grades above the threshold level. Support for distance learning and the opportunity for off-campus study has been strengthened since the COVID-19 pandemic. Sufficient IT resources are in place and a policy to cover distance learning has been implemented.

13 Student involvement in the design, quality assurance and enhancement of their programmes has been embedded. The President of the Student Representative Council or a nominee is included in the membership of both Senate and the Seminary Board, and of all the senate sub-groups except the Business and Course Organisers groups. Students are also represented on the Joint Board of the University of Glasgow and ETS. All students are members of the Student Representative Council and elect a committee to manage the council. Meetings are held regularly to discuss student welfare and any emerging issues. The Council meet annually with the Principal to raise any issues and to review the year. The student handbook gives details of how students can participate in the management of their programmes. The ETS website also provides details and a link to the Student Participation Policy. Representatives from each year group of undergraduates are members of the Board of Studies. All students are encouraged to complete Course Quality Questionnaires and to submit an online Student Satisfaction Survey to the Seminary Board. Postgraduate students complete a Postgraduate Review Form where they are asked to comment on any issues which may have impacted on their studies and which they wish to bring to their Annual Review.

## Background to the desk-based analysis

14 The desk-based analysis serves as a short check on the provider's continuing management of academic standards and quality of provision. It focuses on progress since the previous review/annual monitoring. In addition, it provides an opportunity for QAA to advise the provider of any matters that have the potential to be of particular interest in the next monitoring process or review.

15 The desk-based analysis was carried out by Mrs Sue Miller, Reviewer, and Dr Margaret Johnson, QAA Officer, in January 2022. No meetings were held with students or staff, and the conclusions presented in this report are based on the analysis of documentary evidence submitted by the provider.

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