

## Review for Specific Course Designation: report of the monitoring visit of Irish Baptist College, March 2023

### Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that the Irish Baptist College (the College) is making commendable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the [March 2022 monitoring report](#).

### Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 There have been no significant changes in the management, programme structure, accommodation or staffing at the College since the desk-based annual monitoring in March 2022. There are currently 59 students (37 full-time equivalent) undertaking programmes of study - 30 undergraduates (27 FTE) and 29 postgraduates (10 FTE). The College employs four full-time academic staff and two administrative staff (1.5 FTE). There is a range of visiting faculty contributing to teaching on the programmes. The University of Chester, as the awarding body, currently validates all programmes offered at the College, but is reducing its partnerships and thus has notified the College that validation arrangements will cease in August 2023. The College has established an initial agreement with a new validating partner - Spurgeon's College - and much work is in progress to ensure an effective transition.

### Findings from the monitoring visit

3 The actions identified following the 2021 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER(AP)) have been fully implemented and reported, and evaluation is completed or is in progress. The monitoring team confirmed progress on the recommendations by reviewing a range of evidence, including student handbooks and documents related to the University of Chester, minutes of meetings of the various committees including the Postgraduate Forum, and records of staff development activity, appraisals and peer observations. Evidence of continued progress on the affirmation was seen in the implementation of the revised admissions policy.

4 The HER(AP) of March 2021 offered three recommendations, one affirmation and noted two areas of good practice. The College's Action Plan identified key actions to address the recommendations, with specific targets and success indicators. Actions to address all three recommendations have now been completed.

5 The College has fully addressed the recommendation to further embed the process for the monitoring and development of individual staff, including peer observation and staff appraisal. Documentary evidence of the cycle of appraisals was examined, and staff were able to discuss the process and its value to their development. Processes supporting ongoing professional development were evidenced through examination of documents detailing individual professional development activity (including sabbatical leave opportunities), and through discussion of how corporate development activities are supported and structured at the College.

6 The College's cycle of peer observation has now been completed, with visiting lecturers and core staff all having been reviewed, and core staff having acted as reviewers. The formal reflection on the effectiveness of the full cycle of reviews will take place in the June 2023 staffing committee, with the cycle then continuing in the coming year. The peer observation process evidences an effective balance of supportive proposals for improvement and praise for good practice. Although there is, at this point, no formal process for further dissemination of good practice, staff noted that informal exchanges allowed this to happen in a range of settings.

7 The second recommendation noted the need to more clearly distinguish the process of academic appeals from that of complaints and has been addressed through clarifying information in the student handbooks. Information available articulates the definitions of complaints and appeals, and directs students to the University of Chester processes, when appropriate. The College anticipates that, with the move to a new validating partner, more of the quality assurance responsibilities will fall directly to the College.

8 The third recommendation addressed the need for a process for postgraduate students to contribute to quality enhancement processes, and the College established a committee with this purpose, which met for the first time in June 2022. Students confirmed that they are satisfied with both the formal and informal means of addressing issues, through systematic unit feedback and through liaison committee structures. The College is restructuring its committee system in light of new validation requirements, and, as a result, committee structures will offer a much more extensive role for student participation at all levels from September 2023. These processes will supplement, rather than replace, the current Postgraduate Forum and Student Voice Committee.

9 The affirmation, identified in the HER(AP), of the College's action in articulating and implementing a more formal admissions policy, was completed by the target date. This policy will need to be revised in light of a new validation partnership and subsequent memorandum of agreement. Documentation will be updated both to include new national qualification structures, and also to articulate more clearly admission requirements for postgraduate students. Admissions have been paused temporarily pending final validation agreements being formalised. However, the College is confident that this will not negatively affect student recruitment for the coming year.

10 The College has an enrolment of 59 students in all programmes: the Master of Arts in Theology has 21 students; the Bachelor of Theology has 16; the Bachelor of Divinity has 13; the Postgraduate Diploma has 8; and the Graduate Diploma has 1. Cohort sizes are small, and progression and retention rates are therefore easily impacted by a single individual. Overall, retention rates for the 2021-22 cohort of 16 students are 100%; for the 2020-21 cohort of 21 students, they are 76%; and for the 2019-20 cohort of 21 students, they are 72%. Pass rates for the MA and PGDip (6 students) are 100%; for the Bachelor of Theology and Bachelor of Divinity, pass rates are 50% and 67% respectively; although in each case with very small numbers, percentages are disproportionately affected by student interruptions and withdrawals, making comparisons unreliable. Board of Study meetings, chaired by the University of Chester, review and evaluate enrolment, retention and pass rates within the College.

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

11 Under the current validation arrangements, the College ensures that its internal policies and procedures are congruent with those of the University of Chester. The University's process of Annual Programme renewal (APR) effectively ensures that

qualification standards are in line with national qualification standards, that assessment and classification systems are reliable and consistent, and that students who graduate with a qualification meet or exceed the threshold standards required. The College engages effectively with external examiners, and also utilises external academic expertise on its College Management Committee.

12 The curriculum is currently being comprehensively reviewed and modified in light of the new expectations of Spurgeon's College awards. This extensive work is due to be approved and implemented for the 2023-24 intake and has allowed for further engagement with the Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) and Subject Benchmark Statements in the revisions of the curriculum.

13 Currently, the Board of Study reviews student progress and examines academic standards, and is charged with addressing enhancement and improvement. The new committee structure which has been developed within the College envisages the work of an internal Board of Studies and the Academic Quality Assurance committee being supplemented by a Progression and Awards board, chaired initially by Spurgeon's College. The College is aware that this revised structure will mean that they will have a more direct engagement with the Quality Code and external reference points, rather than this being significantly mediated by their validating university. Initial responses to the expectation of heightened responsibility for assuring academic standards and enhancing the quality of students learning opportunities, demonstrates that the College is well placed to take on this extended role.

## **Background to the monitoring visit**

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

15 The monitoring visit was carried out by Dr Peter Rae, Reviewer, and Simon Ives, QAA Officer, on 10 March 2023.

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