



## Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Spurgeon's College, June 2017

### 1 Section 1: Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that Spurgeon's College (the College) has made acceptable progress with implementing the action plan from the June 2016 [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).

### 2 Section 2: Changes since the last QAA review

2 The College offers full and part-time undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in theological education to equip students for Christian mission and ministry. These programmes are validated by the University of Manchester, University of Wales and University of Chester, however, programmes are being taught out for the latter two universities. Currently there are 240 enrolled students (145 on undergraduate programmes and 95 on postgraduate programmes), compared with 286 enrolled in 2015-16 (177 on undergraduate programmes and 109 on postgraduate programmes). There are 12.2 FTE academic staff together with four members of staff as associate lecturers and 8.2 FTE administrative staff are employed.

3 In November 2016, the Principal stepped down from his role. Consequently, the Governors appointed an interim Chief Executive to guide the College through the period until a new Principal was appointed. The Chief Executive was involved in the appointment of the new Principal and developing the College's new organisational structure. However, he will step down from this role on 13 July 2017; thereafter the new Principal will take on the role of Principal elect. The Principal will formally take up his duties on 1 September 2017 when the new structure will also be in place. Senior managers and staff were able to explain the approaches taken to mitigate the impact of the changes in leadership on the College and students confirmed the commitment of all staff in ensuring the quality of their learning experience during this time.

### 3 Section 3: Findings from the monitoring visit

4 The College is making acceptable progress in implementing the action plan arising from the HER (AP) in June 2016. The actions identified have been addressed and reasonable progress is being made on the aspects yet to be completed. The College continues to consolidate areas of good practice relating to building on external networks (paragraph 5). The College has developed its response to the recommendations on developing an overarching action plan (paragraph 6) and the periodic evaluation of annual monitoring (paragraph 7). Comprehensive admissions processes are in place to identify the suitability of students to study at the College (paragraphs 8 and 9), and the College is in the process of ensuring its application process is compliant with the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) requirements (paragraph 10). Structures and processes are in place for annual monitoring and review (paragraph 11) and students are involved fully in this process (paragraphs 12, 13, and 14). The College operates with small cohort sizes;

this impacts on retention and achievement statistics and steps are being taken to use student data more effectively (paragraph 15).

5 The College has built on the good practice identified in the HER(AP) report of June 2016 relating to the use of external expertise. Extensive links are maintained by staff with outside organisations, groups and individuals both within the UK and overseas and staff also contribute to conferences and undertake research activities. These links are built upon by staff within their teaching and used in the development of course programmes. Regular seminars are held, drawing on the College's external networks and these are valued by students in supporting their academic development, personal ministry and practice, and wider study. Strong external representation is maintained both on the Academic Board and the Quality Assurance Committee and the value of this was confirmed by staff.

6 The College has made progress on the recommendation relating to providing an overarching annual monitoring process that resolves and records all actions in a timely manner. A detailed and institution-wide academic action plan has been developed and this brings together all the actions arising from the College's quality monitoring processes into one working document; however, this plan has yet to be fully embedded in the College's reporting and monitoring procedures.

7 Progress has also been made on the recommendation relating to periodic evaluation of the effectiveness of annual monitoring. A draft procedure for Periodic Evaluation of Annual Monitoring has been developed and following a staff meeting a discussion paper to help identify appropriate key performance indicators has been disseminated, which will act as the basis of the next stages of development. Staff confirmed their awareness of these developments.

8 The College seeks to confirm that its applicants have sufficient English language competence by interviewing all of them, with the exception of those wishing to study in purely online (distance-learning) mode, and trained interviewers use a template which is detailed and thorough. For applicants whose first language is not English and where there are concerns about the applicant's level of English, the Admissions Department requires IELTS test certificates at levels aligned with the requirements of the University of Manchester.

9 The College assesses applicants' prior qualifications using guidance from UCAS and UK NARIC and requires original certificates on application. Interviewers assess the applicant's suitability to study the subject and academic level through interview and by means of their previous qualifications. In order to discern whether applicants have a genuine intention to study, interviewers focus on the applicant's relevant experience, existing knowledge and motivation or calling. Staff and students confirmed that the interview process is rigorous and exacting, with persistent questioning regarding an applicant's ability to dedicate sufficient time and application to their chosen course of study, in respect of their work, family or other commitments. As a result of this, some applicants for full-time study are guided towards part-time study instead.

10 Senior staff confirmed that work had been carried out to ensure that the application process is compliant with CMA requirements, with a staff member attending a CMA conference to ensure clarity as to the College's legal responsibilities in this respect.

11 The College continues to operate effectively its annual quality monitoring processes and procedures and in meeting the reporting and monitoring requirements of its awarding bodies. Revised terms of reference, effective from September 2016, have been implemented for the Academic Board, the Quality Assurance Committee, and the Learning Resources Committee. There are appropriate levels of external representation on the Academic Board and the Quality Assurance Committee and Governors maintain their oversight of quality

across the College through the reporting processes in place. Staff confirmed their understanding of the operation of annual quality monitoring and their respective roles within this.

12 Students continue to be fully engaged in the College's quality assurance and enhancement processes. The current BA review group is the first to which a student representative has been invited as a full member. The College has also been strenuous in its efforts to gather student input into the review of its BA programme, this was confirmed by staff and students and the outcomes of the review exercise will be available on the virtual learning environment (VLE). The College has revised its unit evaluation form, and exit interviews continue to play an important role in feeding back on the experience of completing students and these are, in turn, fed into the College's reporting processes.

13 Students are represented on the Academic Board and on the Quality Assurance Committee. There is also student participation in the Learning Resources Committee, the Diversity and Equal Opportunities Monitoring Group, and in addition the student body has a direct link to the management of the College through the Student-Staff Liaison Committee. During the current academic year, there was an attempt to establish a Student Parliament, but problems with its constitution, which was found to be inappropriate for a small provider, meant that student representatives have reverted to the Student-Staff Liaison Committee which works effectively.

14 Students were particularly appreciative of the ample opportunity available to approach members of staff, on an informal, or formal basis and highlighted the positive contribution that this makes to the learning community at the College. Students also acknowledged the support available both within class and through the VLE, to develop their academic and study skills.

15 The cohort size of programmes offered is small and this, in turn, impacts disproportionately on the statistics for retention and achievement. The average numbers of students initially enrolled per programme over the past three years has not exceeded 4 (2014-15: 2.9 students; 2015-16: 3.1 students; and 2016-17: 3.9 students). In 2014-15, of the twenty-five courses reported, fifteen had 100 per cent retention rates and an average retention rate of 84 per cent and in 2015-16, of the 23 courses reported, seventeen had 100 per cent retention rates and an average retention rate of 81 per cent. In 2014-15, of the nine courses reported, four had 100 per cent achievement rates and an average achievement rate of 71 per cent and in 2015-16, of the two courses reported, both had 100 per cent retention rates. The College is aware of the need to focus further on student data and has engaged with the Higher Education Statistics Agency in this process.

#### **4 Section 4: Progress in working with the external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education**

16 The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is a key external reference point for the College's management of its higher education provision and was a reference point in the formulation of its HER (AP) review in 2016. The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) and the Subject Benchmark Statement on Theology and Religious Studies have shaped programme design and development. For the current academic year, the FHEQ was the special theme for the College's annual peer review process. During the current academic year, the College has also continued to update its policies to ensure compliance with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator and in line with Government requirements regarding Prevent duties.

17 The degree awarding bodies are the most immediate reference points for ensuring that the College conforms to wider national standards. The College's primary partnership

with the University of Manchester is normally subject to a quinquennial review, which fell due this academic year. However, the University has proposed an extension to the end date of the current Agreement until 31 August 2018 and the review will now take place in autumn 2017.

18 The College's role in training people for ministry in the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) requires it to shape relevant programmes around the nationally identified Competencies for Ministry. College staff sit on committees of BUGB and are fully aware of current changes relating to the BUGB revised set of indicators to be implemented from 2018 and the College is working on the necessary adjustment of course content and reporting documentation.

## **5 Section 5: Background to the monitoring visit**

19 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.

20 The monitoring visit was carried out by Stephen Harris (Reviewer), and Mike Ridout (Coordinator) on 28 June 2017.

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