

Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of the Spurgeon's College, June 2018

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) is making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the June 2017 [monitoring visit](#).

2 Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

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, the University of Wales and the University of Chester; however, programmes are being taught out for the latter two universities. Currently there are 308 enrolled students (231 on undergraduate programmes and 77 on postgraduate programmes), compared with 313 enrolled in 2016-17 (225 on undergraduate programmes and 88 on postgraduate programmes). The current Principal took up his duties on September 1 2017.

3 The College received formal notification from the University of Manchester in February 2018 that, as part of a strategic review, it would no longer act as a validator for the College's undergraduate programmes. The College Governors had already recently taken the decision to seek and apply for degree awarding powers for all provision and strategies are in place to ensure the funding and resourcing of the application. A draft Student Protection Plan has been prepared for the Office for Students (OfS) and sets out the College's procedures if a validating partner withdraws. In addition, the College has experience of managing the teach-out of programmes. A consequence of these changes is that the University of Manchester quinquennial review in November 2017 did not take place.

4 Since the withdrawal of the University of Chester in 2016 as the validator for the College's research degrees, approaches have been made to various universities to identify an appropriate partner. A meeting is scheduled in July 2018 with a prospective validating institution to resolve this issue.

3 Findings from the monitoring visit

5 This monitoring report focuses on the key actions arising from the academic action plan (AAP) 2017 (updated April 2018). The identified actions have been addressed and reasonable progress is being made on aspects yet to be fully completed. Actions relate to maintaining the extensive range of external expertise to enhance the students' learning experience; the monitoring of actions arising from the annual monitoring process; the periodic evaluation of the effectiveness of annual monitoring; developing a protocol for the development of new programmes and units; the introduction of online feedback at the end of units; the use of creative assessments; and implementing the changes to learning support available within the College (paragraphs 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10).

6 Members of staff both in the UK and overseas contribute to conferences, undertake research activities and engage in peer review. These activities inform teaching and curriculum development. Regular seminars and external speakers are used in the curriculum to enhance the students' learning experience and academic development. Students were very appreciative of the opportunities that this brings to develop both their academic understanding and ministerial practice. Externality is also maintained by representation on both the Academic Board and the Quality Assurance Committee, and the value of this was noted by academic staff.

7 The College has continued to embed the AAP as the central document for its reporting and monitoring processes. A proposal is in place for the establishment in 2018-19 of a Quality Control Group that will report direct to the governors and have a remit for monitoring the implementation of the AAP. Work on confirming and implementing key performance indicators to measure the effectiveness of annual monitoring has been delayed; however this development is due for completion by December 2018.

8 It is intended that the initial work undertaken on the protocol for the development of new programmes and units will be integrated into an application for degree awarding powers and this, in turn, will inform the continued work of the BA Curriculum Review Group. Progress has been made in promoting use of creative assessments in line with University of Manchester expectations. During 2017-18 students were provided with the opportunity to make creative responses as part of a formative assessment, in which the marked piece of work was intended to demonstrate their understanding of the underlying principles while reflecting on the creative work.

9 The virtual learning environment was used for gathering online student feedback at the end of units for the first time at the end of the first semester 2017-18. The lessons learnt from this initiative were identified and reported through the College structures and, where appropriate, were redeveloped for the second semester.

10 Progress has been made on establishing more robust oversight structures and clearer lines of communication with regard to learning support and its monitoring. Learning support is now overseen by the Academic Director; a Learning Support Committee has been established that will report to the Diversity and Equal Opportunities Monitoring Group and the Academic Board; and the roles of the Disability Officer (Physical) and the Disability Officer (Learning Support) have been separated. Staff were aware of these changes and students spoke positively of the support and understanding available to them relating to their pastoral and academic needs.

11 Students find out about the College from a strong 'confessional' Christian network including alumni. They find online information helpful in explaining the various degrees and routes, and staff provide information and guidance on admissions promptly, showing understanding of students' very different needs. The website is being relaunched in September 2018 and is currently managed jointly by the Academic Director and Director of Operations. At present it does not give consistent information on the validation of degrees, for example, with respect to provision for which Chester validation ceased in 2016.

12 Intention to study is assessed via all applicants for full-time undergraduate programmes being interviewed as part of an interview day. In the academic interview which forms one aspect of this, applicants discuss a piece of reading sent to them beforehand. Decisions on applications to full-time courses are made by an interview panel. Decisions on other applications are made by the Admissions Tutor working with the Admissions Committee and there is an appeal process. Students considered not yet ready to work at degree level are supported through access courses including the Baptist course, Equipped to Minister. IELTS scores of 6.5 are expected for undergraduate entry and 7.0 for master's

degrees. Lack of confidence with academic English has been identified as one of the reasons for underperformance among black and minority ethnic students and improvement here, in the intention to run open pre-sessional courses, is a target. All undergraduate students are encouraged to take the Study Skills course before enrolment, and there are also compulsory study skills sessions in the first semester for all taught students. The College is highly responsive to individual circumstances. If a support need is identified at interview, or during the course, students are referred to Student Support for appropriate assistance, and adaptations to the physical environment can be made where needed.

13 The use of quantitative data in monitoring is developing although the College is aware that there is scope for improvement in its use of data. Collection is now more rigorous with a Compliance Officer in post. Qualitative data deriving from end of unit and end-of-year questionnaires are now administered online with tutors then commenting on the feedback. Two students sit on the Quality Assurance Committee and share awareness of how student questionnaires lead to change in delivery of their programmes. Students are consulted during the development of policy documents, such as the Access and Participation Plan, or as part of Curriculum Review. Student representatives meet the Principal fortnightly and raise any concerns, which are promptly dealt with.

14 As noted in paragraph 5, actions in the AAP have yet to be fully completed due to the changing priorities of the College in the context of its aspiration to seek degree awarding powers, combined with the decision of the University of Manchester to cease validating undergraduate and masters' provision. The Curriculum Review was paused in March 2018 and is expected to resume in September.

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 8. In 2015-16, of the 70 courses reported, 65 had 100 per cent retention rates and an average retention rate of 96 per cent and in 2016-17, of the 68 courses reported, 43 had 100 per cent retention rates and an average retention rate of 74 per cent. In 2015-16, of the 20 courses reported, 11 had 100 per cent achievement rates and an average achievement rate of 78 per cent and in 2016-17, of the 19 courses reported, 10 had 100 per cent achievement rates and an average achievement rate of 71 per cent. Detailed information was provided in the annual return of the College's analysis of its own internal data and that in the annual return. Issues around student transfers, deferrals, withdrawals and students enrolling on a level 4 course and then progressing through to levels 5 and 6 were highlighted in the analysis.

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

16 The College continues to engage with the requirements of the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) and will be implementing changes to the assessment of the Professional Ministry and Practice units in 2018-19 to reflect 'engagement with the formational process' and the emphasis of the BUGB's new Marks of Ministry framework on the development of character. Staff and students were aware of this development and considered it to be beneficial. The College is due to undergo a BUGB peer review process in November 2018.

17 The UK Quality Code for Higher Education continues to act as a reference point, where appropriate, in the development of policies and procedures and was used in the production of the the Fitness to Study Policy that was agreed in January 2018.

5 Background to the monitoring visit

18 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.

19 The monitoring visit was carried out by Professor Helen King, Reviewer, and Mr Michael Ridout, Coordinator, on 28 June 2018.

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