



Specific Course Designation: report of the monitoring visit of St John's College Nottingham Ltd June 2016

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 St John's College Nottingham Ltd (the College) has made commendable progress with continuing to monitor, evaluate and enhance its higher education provision since the [previous monitoring visit in March 2015](#).

2 Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 The total number of higher education students enrolled at the College is 223, compared with 306 recorded in the 2015 monitoring visit report. Although the number of students at the College has undergone a long-term decline, this significant fall is a reflection of the College's strategic decision not to recruit to campus-based programmes for the academic year 2015-16 as part of its review and revision of its educational offering. Current University of Chester and Durham University programmes are currently being taught out, and delivery of a revised Durham University programme, which was validated in 2014, will commence for the academic year 2016-17. Rationalisation and simplification of the College's educational provision, together with a reduction of the campus footprint and a range of asset disposals, are being implemented to eliminate a significant financial deficit and to enable the College to return to long-term sustainability. Other measures include a programme of staff reductions and consideration of a possible institutional merger. Staff, students and other stakeholders have been fully informed about the reasons for, and implications of, these changes and the interests of students have been safeguarded.

3 As part of this process of change and reorientation, the College has undergone a rebranding exercise and is now known as St John's School of Mission, although St John's College Nottingham Ltd continues as its legal entity.

3 Findings from the monitoring visit

4 The 2015 annual monitoring report confirmed that the College had completed the implementation of all of the original recommendations from the 2012 review and had made commendable progress in continuing to monitor, review and enhance its provision. This report reaffirms the 2015 monitoring visit outcome and concludes that the College, while working under challenging institutional circumstances, is committed to the continuous enhancement of the student experience. Evidence to support this conclusion is provided by the institutional commitment to encouraging effective student engagement in College management (paragraph 5), the detailed way in which the College Strategic Plan is continuously extended and evaluated (paragraph 6), the evaluation and updating of policies to enhance their effectiveness (paragraph 7), and the determination demonstrated to ensure that College committees are fit for purpose and focus on the student experience. The visit confirmed that the College quality policies and procedures deliver commendable oversight of the College provision and that a strong commitment to continuous quality improvement is evident in the College's approach to quality management.

5 The monitoring visit confirmed that all actions from the 2012 review have been embedded in College practice. The College's new management structure has been in place for two years and has allowed the College to make timely and effective decisions regarding its provision and strategic direction. For example, there has been a complete repositioning of the curriculum offer, reducing a complex array of 32 programmes to five in order to achieve greater economy in delivery and to enhance the student experience. To manage this transition effectively the College decided temporarily to cease the recruitment of on-site students during the 2015-16 academic year. The new approach to staff appraisal, peer review and staff development, developed in response to the 2012 recommendations, has been adapted to take account of career planning and review at a time of profound change for the College and includes both academic and support staff. There is a high level of student engagement in College management, with students included as members on all key boards and committees, including the Standing Committee and Council of Trustees. Training is provided for student representatives. The College system of student representation is effective and there is a thriving Student Association that is also proactive in promoting student engagement in College management. In addition, the College has recently published a Student Charter and a Student Contract, which clearly set out the College's commitment to engagement of students in a common academic community.

6 The College uses its own quality processes to ensure its ability to evaluate itself and implement effective change. The College's own action plan, termed Strategic Plan, contains all matters that are pertinent to the College, so that it includes such items as estate management as well as academic matters. Item 1 of the current version is to reduce the College deficit by property disposals and the teaching out of loss-making courses; item 2 is to increase student recruitment. The plan is highly detailed, with clearly stated timelines and defined committee responsibilities for implementation and evaluation. The current plan extends to the end of the academic year 2016-17 and is discussed and updated by the Academic Board and Directorate meetings. External examiner reports are positive and are responded to individually by the College. External examiners' reports are also considered and acted upon along with other key indicators of programme-level quality and performance, such as annual programme monitoring reports at senior and executive level meetings.

7 In 2015, the College undertook a strategic review of its established admissions policies in recognition of the changing expectations by applicants of the quality of their applicant experience, linked to the increasing competitiveness of the undergraduate market. The College has in place a comprehensive and well articulated overarching admissions policy, which clearly specifies English language requirements (International English Language Testing System - IELTS - scores of 6.0 for undergraduate programmes to 7.0 overall for postgraduate research programmes), and which is supported by a suite of associated policies. These supporting policies are detailed and deal with procedures for applicants with criminal convictions, for disabled students, guidance on Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), and grounds for appeal of admissions decisions. There is a Special Admissions Policy for applicants who do not meet standard entry criteria. All students undergo a detailed interview and the application form assesses the prospective student's intention to study by asking them to address specifically the question, 'For what purpose are you undertaking this course?' together with some account of their personal spiritual life story. In the course of the admissions process it is made clear to applicants that they will be required to engage in personal formational training as well as academic theology. Applicants are required to provide a considerable amount of detailed information in support of their application and, for ordinands (who also go through a rigorous selection process by the Ministry Division of the Church of England), the support and recommendation of three referees. Students find the admissions process supportive and appreciate the advice they are given at College open days. The revised admissions procedures will be evaluated after one year of operation.

8 The College produces annual monitoring reports for its awarding bodies. That now required by Durham University is more detailed than that formerly produced for the University of Chester and it is in two sections: Formation and Governance and Taught Programmes. The College undertakes its own internal monitoring using a phased approach. Throughout the academic year the Academic Board, which receives the minutes of the Programme Committee, draws upon a range of data such as student surveys - both at College level (National Student Survey) and at individual module level - and a range of performance data, external examiner reports, and module reviews by tutors. Students are represented on the committees responsible and also participate in the annual Faculty Away Day, which concludes the Annual Review. Students confirm that the College is responsive to matters needing attention that are identified in the monitoring process. In the case of a module where students were critical of some aspects of the style and delivery of course materials, adjustments were made, and the issue of the 'bunching' of assessments was also readily addressed. Similarly, improvements were made to the College's virtual learning environment as a result of student comment. The procedures in place for quality monitoring are thorough and effective, although the College recognises that response rates to module questionnaires are in some cases low, and it is taking steps to improve this.

9 The majority of College students are already graduates, over 21 years of age and studying part-time. As noted in paragraph 7, applicants undergo an extensive selection process devised by the Church of England as well as the College admission procedures. The acceptance rate of applicants is in the order of 50 per cent. The rigour of the selection process, together with the exceptional level of motivation and commitment of the students, combined with high levels of pastoral support, leads to commendable levels of student retention and achievement. Indeed, for both the University of Chester and Durham University degree and certificate programmes retention rates are normally 100 per cent. Of 57 students, for example, enrolled on two-year University of Chester programmes in 2013, no students discontinued and there was a 100 per cent pass rate. Indeed, the College student data return for the last three years reveals that only two failures were recorded across the whole of the College provision.

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

10 The College has mapped its policies, procedures and practices against the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) using a mapping document similar to that provided by its awarding body, the University of Chester, and updated to align with its own systems. Reference is made to the expectations contained in relevant section of the Quality Code when policies are revised, an example being the suite of admissions procedures referred to in paragraph 7. The Strategic Plan draws upon the Quality Code where relevant when monitoring and developing College procedures and learning opportunities. Examples include the College review of assessment methods and the College's virtual learning environment. The Church of England Ministry Division Common Awards Framework provides an important external benchmark and the expectations of the College's awarding bodies, together with the *Subject Benchmark Statement: Theology and Religious Studies*, published by QAA, inform award programme specifications, which are highly detailed.

5 Background to the monitoring visit

11 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.

12 The monitoring visit was carried out by Mr Tom Cantwell, Reviewer, and Professor Nicholas Goddard, Coordinator, on 7 June 2016.

QAA1672 - R8168 - July 16

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