



Quality Review Visit of St Mary's University College

February 2018

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about St Mary's University College

The QAA review team formed the following rounded judgements about the higher education provision at St Mary's University College.

- **There can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable with standards set and achieved in other providers in the UK.**
- **There can be confidence that the quality of the student academic experience meets baseline regulatory requirements.**

Areas for development

The review team identified the following **areas for development** that have the potential to enhance quality and/or further secure the reliability and/or comparability of academic standards at St Mary's University College. The review team advises St Mary's University College to:

- explicitly articulate the lines of reporting and responsibilities relating to the management and oversight of academic standards (Code of Governance)
- ensure that the opportunities for student engagement it offers allow for a more comprehensive student representation system (Quality Code)
- ensure that assessment feedback is consistently provided in a timely manner (Quality Code).

About this review

The review visit took place from 20 to 21 February 2018 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Ms Sophie Elliott (student reviewer)
- Mrs Catherine Fairhurst
- Mr Peter Hymans.

The overall aim of Quality Review Visit is to:

- provide the relevant funding body with an expert judgement about the readiness of a provider to enter, or continue to operate within, the higher education sector.

Quality Review Visit is designed to:

- ensure that the student interest is protected
- provide expert advice to ensure that the reputation of the UK higher education system is protected, including the protection of degree standards
- identify development areas that will help a provider to progress through a developmental period and be considered 'established'.

Each review visit considers a provider's arrangements against relevant aspects of the baseline regulatory requirements, and in particular:

- the reliability of degree standards and their reasonable comparability with standards set and achieved by other providers
- the quality of the student academic experience, including student outcomes where the provider has a track record of delivery of higher education.

About St Mary's University College

St Mary's University College (the University College) is based in Belfast City and was founded in 1900 with a mission to educate and train teachers in the Catholic tradition; teacher education still remains at the core of University College life today. Since 1948, the University College has worked in collaboration with Queen's University Belfast (the University) as its awarding body. The relationship has developed to the extent that in 1998 the University College entered into a memorandum of agreement with the University, retaining the University as its only awarding body but remaining autonomous in governance and finance. As a result, the Privy Council designated the College as a University College.

The University College's current higher education provision includes: a BEd (Hons) Primary, a BEd (Hons) Post-Primary, a PGCE and a Master's of Education. The only non-teaching programme is the BA (Hons) in Liberal Arts, offering a combination of focused study in one discipline with broad interdisciplinary development. The total number of students at the University College at the time of the review was 961, with the majority of students being full-time. Only the level 7 programmes recruit part-time students.

The University College's vision statement is to be an ever more effective instrument of educational progress for individuals as well as for society, and to help advance the economic, cultural and social development of the local community and region. The University College promotes widening access to higher education through its government-approved plan, which has seen success in recruiting students from low socio-economic groups and promotes strong links with the local community and partnerships.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)

1 The University College has effective arrangements in place, as set out in its Quality Assurance Handbook, to ensure that academic standards are at a level that meets the UK threshold standards as set out in the FHEQ. Following the quality assurance procedures of its awarding body, the University College sets and maintains standards when reviewing and approving programmes and follows its responsibilities set out within the Memorandum of Agreement.

2 Each programme is subject to annual review, during which the programme team is responsible for ensuring that the learning outcomes within programme specifications of current awards align to the qualification descriptors of the FHEQ; this process is also enacted for any changes made to current provision. This monitoring of academic standards is completed within the University College, and followed by scrutiny and approval of any concluding action plans by the awarding body.

3 Teacher education courses at the University College are also developed in line with the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) Competence Framework to ensure that students can build core values as 'reflective and active practitioners' within the teaching profession. Programmes also comply with relevant QAA Subject Benchmark Statements to ensure a national comparison of standards is achieved.

4 The University College utilises external examiners in the design of assessments and throughout moderation processes. As members of both programme and subject boards, external examiners provide valuable insight into the higher education landscape, ensuring provision is comparable with those of other UK higher education providers.

5 Academic staff at the University College are informed of processes of programme design, monitoring and review, and are aware of their individual and collective responsibilities in ensuring that academic standards meet UK thresholds, benchmarks and frameworks.

The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Code of Governance published by the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (DfENI)

6 The University College's governance arrangements for maintaining oversight of academic governance are contained in its Scheme of Management (SoM) and the Scheme of Delegated Authority. The SoM provides for the establishment of an Academic Board, which acts as consultative committee and can make representations to the University College's Board of Governors on academic matters.

7 There is also an Academic Council responsible for the oversight of academic affairs at the University College. The Academic Council has a number of duties within its remit that relate to academic standards, including the approval of new modules and programmes. The Council produces an annual report, which is considered by the Board of Governors and provides it with the oversight of academic standards. University College staff confirmed that the Academic Council is responsible for the oversight of academic standards, but recognised that this was not explicit within its documentation or the SoM, which needs to be read in

conjunction with the Scheme of Delegated Authority. The review team advises the University College to explicitly articulate the lines of reporting and responsibilities relating to the management and oversight of academic standards, identifying this as an **area for development**.

8 Governance of academic freedom is also detailed within the SoM. Staff confirmed that they were not restricted in their teaching or research related to the University College's goals and that they felt that the University College had a refreshing approach to research, which was more liberal than at other institutions.

9 The Board of Governors is responsible for ensuring that effective risk management arrangements are in place. Oversight of risk management rests with the Audit Committee. Risk management is a standing item on the Committee's agenda and the Committee provides a full report of each of its meetings to the Board of Governors. The University College risk register is comprehensive, includes academic risks, and is reviewed quarterly by the senior management team.

The Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code)

10 The University College has effective arrangements for discharging its responsibilities and maintaining the academic standards of its awards. The University has ultimate responsibility for the academic quality and standards of all programmes at the University College. The University College's Academic Council is responsible for the oversight of its academic affairs at the College. There is effective academic integration between the University and the University College.

11 As the University College is considered in the same way as the University's schools, the University College's arrangements and quality procedures to maintain academic standards are applied in parallel with the schools. These include programme validation, annual programme reviews, the approval of staff appointments, and external examiners' reports, together with external accreditation. The University College adheres to the academic frameworks and regulations of the University. The University has responsibility for programme design, development, and approval, with the resulting documentation published on the University's student information system (QSIS).

12 The University College follows the University's procedures for annual programme review and periodic review. The University Annual Programme Review Panel receives the annual programme report, makes recommendations, affirmations and identifies good practice. The arrangements for the maintenance of academic standards are effective, as shown by the 2017 annual programme review. In this, the Panel commended the University College on the documentation and standard of its programmes, which are comparable to those of similar programmes in the University and compatible with any relevant benchmarks recognised within the UK. Action plans arising from annual programme review are submitted to the University Education Committee.

13 The external examiners' reports confirm that the management of academic standards is effective, and that the standards of student performance are comparable with similar programmes or study in other institutions. Teaching staff use the programme specifications and Learning and Teaching Strategy to monitor and maintain academic standards.

14 Academic standards are further confirmed by GTCNI accreditation of the initial teacher education programmes. Teacher education-related courses are reviewed for quality purposes by the Education and Training Inspectorate on behalf of the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy.

15 The University College tests that students have achieved the set academic standards by formally assessing learning outcomes. The arrangements for these assessments are effective. The University College's Learning and Teaching Strategy is aligned with the University's Education Strategy; the University College's Assessment Policy is also in line with that of the University. The University College carries out assessment according to the procedures and regulations of the University. The University College is responsible for setting, marking, moderation and feedback of all assessments.

16 The University College's formally constituted subject and programme boards of examiners are responsible for determining and approving awards in accordance with university standards and in conjunction with external examiners appointed by the University. Board minutes demonstrate that student achievement is calibrated relative to the threshold standard in a consistent manner and systematic.

17 The external examiners' reports all confirm that the structure of the programmes enables the learning outcomes to be met, and that assessment processes are appropriate and allow students to meet the programme and learning outcomes.

Rounded judgement

18 The University College's quality assurance arrangements are appropriate in enabling it to fulfil its responsibilities to its awarding body, and to align with the main baseline regulatory requirements in the maintenance of academic standards. The review team identified an area for development that advises the University College to explicitly articulate the lines of reporting and responsibilities relating to the management and oversight of academic standards.

19 The review team concludes that there can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable with standards set and achieved in other providers in the UK.

Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

The Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code)

20 The University College has a number of strategies and policies in place, including the Learning and Teaching Strategy, the Student Support Strategy and the Assessment Policy, which outline the University College's approach to ensure learning opportunities are made available to students to enable them to achieve their awards.

21 Admissions policies are clear and transparent, setting out governance responsibilities, entry criteria, and recruitment and selection processes. This ensures that the University College's admissions process is underpinned by principles of fair admission. The enhanced induction programme 'Stepping Stones' aims to provide incoming students with an extensive and informative introduction to their programmes, and a resourceful experience that welcomes individuals to begin their academic career with the University College.

22 Working with staff, students and external stakeholders, the University College systematically reviews and enhances the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices through programme review and staff development opportunities. The teaching is highly regarded by the student body, who feel that staff at the University College are shaping them into successful professionals. The Learning and Teaching Strategy, which aligns with the awarding body's Education Strategy 2016-21 and ensures that the higher education curriculum is characterised by inter-disciplinary perspectives, providing a dynamic and relevant education that leads to graduate success.

23 The Student Support Strategy outlines the University College's strategic approach to enabling students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential. Results from internal and external student surveys evidence the University College's strengths in successfully providing strong student guidance and support mechanisms. Students highly regard the pastoral support available at the University College and the Careers Service available to them.

24 The University College takes deliberate steps to engage students as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience. The Student Charter sets out the University College's approach to student engagement, ensuring that staff and students are aware of their responsibilities within the University College community. The student body is represented by the Students' Union or Student Representative Committee; members of the committee are elected and have the responsibility to represent the views, opinions and best interests of the student body as a whole. The Students' Union undertakes shared actions to ensure international students are looked after appropriately, organising a buddy system to ensure international students are integrated effectively and are provided with any necessary information easily. Staff-Student Consultative Committees meet periodically to discuss all elements of the student experience.

25 Student representatives have the opportunity to sit on all levels of University College senior meetings, however, the range of students attending is limited and the review team found that students from different programmes wanted representation across all programmes at various University College meetings. The University College acknowledged that student representation at an institutional level is limited and challenging. Currently, the opportunity is carried out by designated individuals, who are officers of the Students' Union, and not given to student representatives across every programme at the University College.

The review team advises the University College to ensure that the opportunities for student engagement it offers allow for a more comprehensive student representation system, identifying this as an **area for development**.

26 The University College operates equitable and valid processes of assessment, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit of qualification being sought. Requirements for assessment are clear and transparent, available to both staff and students within programme handbooks. The University College has a substantive assessment policy. However, the review team found that the University College does not ensure consistency in its approach to feedback, and that the time scales set out within the assessment policy are not always adhered to when assessments are not processed electronically. The review team advises the University College to ensure that assessment feedback is consistently provided in a timely manner, identifying this as an **area for development**.

27 The University College makes scrupulous use of external examiners in the monitoring and reviewing of academic standards and the student experience. The University College is responsible for nominating candidates, who are scrutinised by the Learning and Teaching Committee, before being appointed by the awarding body's Academic Council. Students are aware of the role of external examiners and have access to reports via the University College's extranet.

28 The University College operates effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and reviewing programmes, which are aligned to the procedures of the University and are in collaboration with students and external stakeholders. In discharging responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards, the University College assures and enhances the quality of learning opportunities through rigorous annual review of modules and programmes, which leads to the production of annual programme review reports for each course. Where a change is planned to a programme, the University College follows the procedures of the awarding body; a process of consultation with current students takes place before the programme team submits a formal proposal to change modules. Under the terms of the Memorandum of Agreement, the awarding body has responsibility for the introduction, amendment or closure of courses offered by the University College. The University College therefore follows University procedures on these matters.

29 The University College's use of data to monitor and enhance the quality of the student experience is effective. Key performance indicators, including retention and achievement, are considered by the Board of Governors annually. The Board also monitors widening participation data and graduate employability. The Academic Council has within its remit oversight of academic affairs, and receives reports of student surveys and retention, progression and achievement data. Through consideration of data, the University College identified an issue with early withdrawal on one programme and as a result implemented Stepping Stones, an extended induction and transition programme that improved retention. The Stepping Stones project will be extended to all provision in the next year.

30 The University College offers wide-ranging opportunities for compulsory and non-compulsory work placements across all its programmes, and governance arrangements at appropriate levels are in place for all learning opportunities that are not directly provided by the University College. The appropriate policies, procedures and safeguards are in place to ensure that students have an appropriate and beneficial experience on work placements. Risks of each arrangement to deliver learning opportunities with others are assessed at the outset and reviewed subsequently on a periodic basis. Students value the support provided by the University College when attempting to find work placements, and feel that learning opportunities they experience outside of the University College compliment their studies within the University College.

The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Code of Governance published by the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (DfENI)

31 The Board of Governors includes an elected student member with full voting rights in its membership. The Academic Board includes membership of the Students' Union President and Vice-President. The Students' Union President is also a member of the Academic Council. Students stated in the student submission to this report, and at the visit, that they would appreciate more opportunities to participate on committees within the University College. This has been highlighted as an area for development in paragraph 25.

32 Under the terms of the Memorandum of Agreement, non-academic complaints are entirely the responsibility of the University College. The University College has a comprehensive Complaints Handling Procedure (CHP), which is approved by the Board of Governors. The Secretary to the Board of Governors has responsibility for overseeing the operation of the complaints processes. The Board of Governors receives reports from senior management on issues raised in appeals and complaints and the University College's response to matters raised in these appeals and complaints. Although the University College has had few formal complaints, complaints records demonstrate thorough responses to complaints by students.

Policies and procedures are in place to ensure consumer protection obligations are met (Competition and Markets Authority guidance)

33 The University College's Admission Policies, and the detailed admissions page on the website, ensure that the approach to admissions is consistent and transparent. The Admission Policies meet Expectation B2 of the Quality Code. The website clearly describes the application procedure for applicants, including when to apply, the approach to equality and diversity, specific programme details and disability support. To further ensure consistency, the Policies identify the responsibilities for the admissions process and its review. The University College has decided not to admit students through UCAS. However, to ensure the Policies are in line with University policies, the University College submits the Admissions Policies to the University Education Committee annually. The trained registry staff provide effective guidance to applicants on the process of application and admission. Students confirmed that the admissions and enrolment procedures are consistent and transparent.

34 The University College recognises the importance of providing accurate and relevant information to prospective students, particularly in regard to student retention. All programme information is the responsibility of University College except the programme specifications, which are documents of the University. Students confirmed that there are effective arrangements to ensure that applicants have the information they need to make an informed decision. Prospective students can access information about the University College and its programmes through various media, including the University College website, the online prospectus, the undergraduate entry guideline brochure, open days and school career events. The Marketing and Recruitment Information Policy describes the procedures for ensuring that information is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. The University College also uses feedback from applicants and careers staff in schools to inform recruitment material. The public information aligns with the Competition and Markets Authority guidelines.

35 The terms and conditions are fair, transparent and easily accessible by students before, during and after the admissions and enrolment process. The offer letter and joining instructions are clear and unambiguous. Students are sent details of the overall terms at

offer stage, with specific guidelines relating to acceptance of the offer. The website contains financial terms and conditions and full financial information. The University College surveys students about their understanding of the terms and conditions and College policies are subject to equality screening. Students articulated their awareness and understanding of the terms and conditions.

36 The University College's processes for complaint handling are effective and rigorous. The Memorandum of Agreement between the University College and the University gives students access to the University appeals procedures for academic matters, although they would use the College complaints procedures for non-academic matters. The University College's Consumer Rights and Complaint Handling Strategy directly addresses the arrangements to ensure that students are given up front, clear, timely, accurate and comprehensive information; that terms and conditions are fair; and that complaints handling processes are accessible, clear and fair. The CHP is accessible and available on the University College website. Although mediation is mentioned, the CHP does not allow for separate independent investigation. The CHP does not explicitly state that unresolved complaints can be escalated to NIPSO, although reference to NIPSO is made on the University College website. Complaints made through the CHP are reported to the strategic management team. There are very few examples of complaints received through the Admissions Appeals and Complaints Procedure or through the University College CHP. However, the report provided to the review team demonstrates that procedures are conducted in a timely and fair manner.

Student protection measures as expressed through the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman's (NIPSO) Principles of Good Administration

37 Under the terms of the Memorandum of Agreement, in academic matters students have access to the University appeals procedures, while in non-academic matters students have access to the College complaints procedures. Student handbooks give brief guidance and direction to policies for appeals and complaints, and students are reminded at key points of the academic year of the procedures and given guidance on how to access them. Individual cases are monitored to identify any lack of clarity so that procedures can be revised.

38 Where a student makes a complaint under the CHP, it is investigated by trained senior staff who have no previous involvement in the student's education and are clearly not involved in the case in question. The provision of external training ensures that those dealing with the complaint handle it in a competent and confidential manner.

39 There have been very few complaints using the CHP in recent years. There has, however, been a higher frequency of matters brought under complaints handling procedures of the Admissions Policies. These are reviewed annually to ensure that they have been handled in a proportionate, fair and timely manner: any issues arising are included in the annual admissions report for action by management. The most recent report does not demonstrate any such issues. The CHP contains details of how complaints are used to make improvements.

40 The University College has recognised the implementation of NIPSO and its relevance to the University College. A reference to this avenue for escalating unresolved complaints on completion of the University College procedure has been placed on the University College website, but has not yet been incorporated into the CHP.

Rounded judgement

41 Arrangements at the University College for the academic governance and management of the student academic experience are appropriate and effective in the context of the responsibilities delegated to it by its awarding body, and the baseline regulatory requirements. The review team identified two areas for development that the University College should consider in the future, both of which relate to the Quality Code: the need to ensure comprehensive student representation and timeliness of student assessment feedback.

42 The review team concludes that there can be confidence that the quality of the student academic experience meets baseline regulatory requirements.

QAA2226 - R9945 - Aug 18

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2018
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel: 01452 557050
Website: www.qaa.ac.uk