

Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of The Cambridge Theological Federation, May 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 the Cambridge Theological Federation (the Federation) has made acceptable progress with implementing the action plan from the May 2017 [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).

2 Changes since the last QAA review

2 The Federation continues to act as a centre for the provision of ecumenical theological education, primarily for those seeking ordination. 13 programmes, validated by the University of Cambridge, Durham University and Anglia Ruskin University, are offered through seven of the nine constituent houses; 314 students are currently studying at the Federation. The President of the Federation is currently the Principal of Westminster College.

3 The Federation has commenced an operational review to ensure its resilience and capability in meeting the changing needs of its external and internal environment. The proposed four-year business plan charting the way forward is due for discussion at the Federation Governing Council on 8 May 2018.

4 In March 2018, the Registrar left their post and the Federation has taken appropriate steps to mitigate the impact of staffing changes.

3 Findings from the monitoring visit

5 The Federation is making acceptable progress in implementing the action plan arising from the 2017 review. Reasonable progress has been made to revise the student representation structure and implement the actions identified and associated activity (see paragraph 6). The Federation continues to consolidate the areas of good practice relating to academic governance; student personal and professional development; and the student attachment and placement system (see paragraph 7).

6 The Federation has taken steps to address the recommendation to revise the student representation structure to facilitate a more student-centred approach to student engagement. Discussions have taken place between the Federation and the Student Forum and the Forum has a regular item on the agendas of both the Federation Management Committee and the Federation Governing Council. Within its action plan, the Federation acknowledges the challenges faced by students to attend and contribute to committees due to their workload and placement commitments. This was confirmed by students. As a consequence, a system has been established whereby students are able to feedback through a specific email to the Federation, which feeds into the 'Student Feedback and Responses' area on the virtual learning environment (VLE). This area contains copies of the action plans arising from the Common Awards Management Committee and if students are unable to attend committee meetings then matters can be raised by email to be dealt with as part of the business. A working party has been established to consider how the Federation addresses student feedback and the first meeting was held in April 2018. Work has also

taken place on developing a student charter which has identified the expectations on students and will form the basis of future documentation setting out the expectations placed on the Federation and students. Opportunities to support student representatives in their role take place through handover briefings and email support; the Federation is exploring the accessibility of student representative online training materials available through their university partners. Students spoke positively of the steps taken by the Federation to improve student engagement and feedback however they also identified the need for building on this achievement to realise fully the contribution of student representatives.

7 The Federation has built on the good practice identified in the 2017 review. The Federation's academic governance system continues to operate effectively and the Federation's Annual Programme Review provides a central focus for quality and enhancement of academic programmes. Staff spoke positively about the operation of the Federation's academic governance and the close working within and across the houses. The holistic and collegiate approach to student personal and professional development continues to enhance the student experience. Students spoke appreciatively of the support available to them both in terms of study support and the proactive approach of the Federation in meeting learning needs together with providing an environment for them to grow both as individuals and as a community. The personalised student focused placement and attachment system continues to provide opportunities for student development and ministerial formation. Students spoke of the valuable opportunities to develop their skills and understanding within a range of placements available to them and also of the support provided to reflect on the challenges in dealing with demanding situations. Staff also articulated the steps being taken to support placement supervisors, share practice and to improve the processes underpinning the placement and attachment system.

8 The Federation's recruitment, selection and admissions procedures continue to be governed by the policies of the awarding bodies. The admissions processes and criteria for all programmes provided by the Federation are outlined clearly in the admissions policies of the member universities. The Federation has delegated authority from the University of Durham to admit standard entrants to its undergraduate programmes and provides comprehensive and detailed admissions information in its admissions policy and on its website. The Federation's website links directly to the websites of member institutions, including their entry requirements and processes. In compliance with the University of Durham's entry requirements applicants to the Common Award are required to provide evidence of their academic qualifications and English language proficiency. Those for whom English is not their first language are required to achieve a minimum of 6.0 overall in the International English Language Testing System. Support for applicants declaring disabilities is clearly articulated and valued by students. Students confirmed that information on admissions requirements is clearly and accurately presented on web pages and promotional material.

9 All applicants to the Common Award Programme are interviewed by admissions staff from within the Federation Houses who record reasons for application decisions, ensure that successful applicants are suitable for the programmes offered to them and that there is consistency in the interview questions asked of candidates. Many applicants are sponsored by their church or diocese to study at one of the Federation Houses. Applicants who do not meet academic entry requirements may be offered alternative non-academic programmes as relevant to their needs and those of their sponsoring church or diocese. Admissions staff attend training run by the University of Cambridge and good practice is shared informally across the Federation Houses and at Academic Committee. Admissions forms are reviewed regularly by the Federation Houses admissions teams.

10 The Federation's Management Committee oversees student and programme performance. Annual self-evaluations are conducted by programme teams and reviewed by programme management committees and the Academic Committee and approved by the Federation's Management Committee. Annual self-evaluations contribute towards the annual review of programmes conducted by the Federation Learning and Teaching Core Team where external examiner reports, student feedback on modules and progression and achievement data are also considered. The Academic Committee considers annual programme self-assessments and reports on these to the Management Committee, including common themes, areas for improvement and good practice. Action plans continue to be monitored by the Academic Committee. The Federation recognises the need to implement more systematic approaches to the monitoring of student retention and achievement and is developing a database to support this.

11 Student representation on key committees including the Academic Committee and Federation Management Committee provides students with a means of giving feedback and raising issues. Module evaluations are undertaken at the end of modules and used to inform programme development. The Student Forum has representation from across all the Federation Houses and is currently developing a Student Charter to be implemented in 2018. The Federation has established a working party to review student feedback mechanisms and enhance the feedback cycle. It recognises also the need to improve training for student representatives to strengthen their engagement in quality enhancement. The Federation's VLE enables students to access student feedback and the Federation's responses to it.

12 Annual peer observations of teaching provide a means of sharing good practice and are used to inform staff appraisals.

13 There is a range of cohort sizes for the programmes offered, where these are small this impacts disproportionately on the statistics for retention and achievement. For 2014-15, average performance on full-time courses was retention 85 percent and achievement 98 percent; this was also reflected in the higher recruiting part-time courses. For those part-time courses with 15 and less students there was variable performance. Average retention for the seven completing courses in 2015-16 was 93 percent and achievement was 99 percent. Average retention for the 13 courses recorded in the data return for 2016-17 was 85 per cent and the achievement for the three reported course was 95 per cent. The Federation identified in its annual and data return the impact of transfers and withdrawals together with changes in external factors on the data presented and was able to provide detailed information on individual programme performance.

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

14 The Federation aligns its policies and procedures to the Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code), recognising it as a key reference point to design policies and procedures for maintaining academic standards and quality. New staff are introduced to the Quality Code as part of the Federation's induction process. The Church of England conducts Periodic External Review of ministerial training within the Federation every six years and the next visit is due to take place in 2019.

5 Background to the monitoring visit

15 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.

16 The monitoring visit was carried out by Ms Lynn Fulford, Reviewer, and Mr Mike Ridout, Coordinator, on 3 May 2018.

QAA2145 - R9996 - June 18

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