Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of The Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, March 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 Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education (the Foundation) has made acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the previous [monitoring visit in March 2017](.).

2 Changes since the last QAA review/monitoring visit

2　　At the annual monitoring visit in March 2017 there were 371 student enrolments on undergraduate, postgraduate and research programmes. Now there are 345, which represents a decrease of seven per cent.

3　　The Foundation continues to deliver undergraduate, postgraduate and research programmes to students many of whom are sponsored by the Church of England or the Methodist Church after being selected for recognised or ordained ministry in their denomination. The Foundation has formal validation relationships with Newman University Birmingham, Durham University and University of Gloucestershire, and is a partner in the delivery and support of students registered for research degrees with University of Birmingham and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The teach-out of undergraduate programmes validated by Newman University and provision validated by University of Gloucestershire are in the final stages. The validation relationship will remain with Newman University Birmingham for master's students.

4　　There have been no significant changes to the academic structure or premises used by the Foundation since the 2017 annual monitoring visit. The new building housing teaching and student accommodation, which became available for use in summer 2017, is now fully integrated into the organisational facilities. A strategic review of the impact of the new accommodation has been started and will report by Easter 2018.

3 Findings from the monitoring visit

5　　The review team considered a wide range of evidence, including strategic, policy and programme documentation, information on the Foundation's website and on the virtual learning environment (VLE). A meeting was held with senior staff to discuss progress made during the past year against the action plan from the Higher Education Review (AP) of March 2016. The review team also met a cross-section of students, drawn from undergraduate and postgraduate taught and research programmes. The QAA action plan had been updated in January 2018, however, the Foundation has not yet developed an overarching institutional action plan aside from the QAA action plan. The team found that the Foundation has continued to make acceptable progress in building on the two recommendations (paragraphs 8, 9 and 10), two features of good practice (paragraphs 6 and 7), and two affirmations (paragraphs 11 to 14).

6   The Foundation has maintained the good practice in ensuring that all students have access to integrated academic and pastoral support. This support is highly responsive to needs and facilitates achievement and personal development in academic and formation activities. The wide-ranging personalised support starts from the pre-application stage and includes the provision of taster sessions for enquirers and applicants, a buddy system for new students, and a dedicated tutor system for all taught students. A comprehensive induction programme for all new students takes place on the Foundation's main campus to ensure cross-cohort engagement and familiarity with the campus and its staff. Academic support in all programmes has been expanded by the embedding of study skills sessions and online tutorials, including on plagiarism avoidance. The well-designed and easily navigable VLE is used to provide additional academic, pastoral and community support.

7   The library provision continues to provide an extensive and responsive service to students which is well regarded. The Foundation has made further developments during the current academic year, mainly in copyright compliance and compilation of reading lists. The use of, and access to, electronic sources including e-books is reviewed year on year. Subscriptions to major sources of e-books have been ongoing since 2015, and additional e-books will be made available for Common Awards students.

8   Further progress has been made with addressing the two recommendations identified at the 2016 HER (AP) visit. The monitoring visit report of March 2017 reported that the Foundation had taken action to ensure that teaching and learning was more clearly differentiated by level and university. The updated action plan of January 2018 does not record further action for this area. The Academic Handbooks now clearly explain the concept of academic levels, and that assessment will be differentiated according to each level of study. The Module Handbooks state the level of the module clearly. Module pages on the VLE have clearly delineated sections for those studying at different levels, with separate module handbooks, assignment dropboxes and assessment guidelines.

9   To ensure greater attention to differentiation for 2017-18, a new level 6 pathway has been developed for Lichfield curates. Some teaching across levels still operates for programmes validated by Durham University, but steps have been taken to ensure that there are separate module handbooks and that assessment is level specific. The updated action plan does not indicate a timescale or targets for the evaluation of this activity.

10   The Foundation has continued to develop the module and programme level information provided to students. A common template for module and academic handbooks has been introduced and information on the VLE has been standardised and is now consistent across all programmes. A new section has been added to academic handbooks to indicate actions taken as a result of the module evaluation process. Students commented that module and programme information provided prior to admission had improved, but there were still some difficulties in obtaining details of modules, personalised programme information and accurate reading lists. These developments have yet to be evaluated formally.

11   The Foundation takes student views seriously and tries to facilitate a strengthening of student engagement and the student voice. Many students are reluctant to take on the role of representative, attributed to multiple commitments and competing priorities. Despite this, there has been a recent increase in student engagement across a range of activities within the Foundation. Student community meetings are now embedded into weekend teaching, a useful induction session was held for new representatives in November 2017, and handover arrangements between successive representatives have been improved. There is an area on the VLE and an electronic discussion board for student representatives to use, but work remains to be done to improve dissemination from the representatives to the student body.

12   Students had engaged with the first elections for Common Awards representatives in 2016 and new elections are due early 2018. Students are involved in the production of the annual self-evaluation for Common Awards. They also contributed to, and provided feedback on, the Common Awards student conference. The Student-Staff Community Forum (SSCF) is co-chaired by a student representative. A set of role descriptors for the SSCF has very recently been developed.

13   The deterring and detection of plagiarism, along with other types of academic malpractice, have continued to be discussed and monitored at Academic Management Group (AMG) and Academic Quality and Standards Group (AQSG). The Academic Malpractice Policy for Common Awards Students was reviewed in September 2017 after its first 18 months of operation, and some definitions of malpractice were amended. A Proof Reading Guide for students and proof readers has been developed. Face-to-face study skills sessions have been included to address poor referencing and academic practice.

14   Assignments for the majority of programmes are now submitted and marked online. The online software is primarily used as a marking tool. While in-text and summative feedback is provided, students the team met reported that they found some of the comments and feedback difficult to access. Where appropriate, the text matching application is used by staff. The AMG agreed in November 2017 to allow students access to the text-matching report as a means of formative assessment. This will be introduced on most programmes from April 2018. Students who trialled this responded positively. Students reported that marked work was not always returned within the four working week time limit.

15   The Foundation operates a highly complex admission system, with variations of process for different churches and diocese. Applicants have diverse occupational and academic experience. References are taken up for all applicants. The Academic Planning Group (APG) is bringing together all eight groups of admissions processes to try to ensure consistency. At levels 4 to 7, the APG acts as the admission panel for the institution and processes applications for admission through Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). Awarding bodies confirm that the admissions systems, including processes for the granting of APL, work well. Doctoral degree applications are managed by the Research Committee, and a representative of the validating university may be in attendance.

16   The Foundation also offers a preparatory programme for prospective students to experience the range of programmes and facilities which are available. All new undergraduates enter at CertHE level. Students confirm that the admissions process, while complex, is very proactive and accessible, and that staff are very helpful throughout. Particular attention is given to students with individual support needs.

17   Consideration is given to applicants' academic suitability, experience of the church and English language ability. Discussions continue with sponsoring churches as to the best ways to ensure English language competency on entry. The Foundation uses the IELTS system as an external reference point, and applicants may be asked to provide a sample of written work and undertake an interview designed to assess verbal skills and intention for studying.

18   There remains variation of practice in terms of addressing English language competence, partly through the processes of different referring stakeholders.
The Foundation has been working with the Methodist church over the past year to improve the portfolio mechanism which is currently in place, due to a discrepancy between entry standards and on-course achievement. External examiner reports continue to identify concerns about English language competency within submitted work, and that further skills development is required. Some concern remains over English language competency of applicants, and the Foundation is considering including a set assessment taken on site for all

students prior to registration, to determine the offer of a place on a credit or non-credit bearing programme.

19   The Foundation has in place processes for the regular review of its provision. Detailed annual self-evaluation or monitoring reports are produced for each awarding body, drawing on comments identified in external examiner reports. Students play an active role in the annual processes. Feedback for the self-evaluation is gathered by student representatives through community meetings. Undergraduate and postgraduate student representatives are members of the AMG and also sit on the AQSG. The AQSG is a sub-group of the AMG and is responsible for the production of the annual self-evaluation.

20   Module evaluations are undertaken for all programmes. The format for Newman University module evaluations is driven by the University's template. Evaluations for University of Durham Common Awards have been under review during 2017 in relation to the methods of collection and questions posed. During 2016-17, an online module evaluation questionnaire was piloted for Durham Common Awards programmes, and another is being trialled in 2017-18. The Foundation considers that the move to electronic questionnaires has created work, raised concerns about anonymity and depressed the return rates. Therefore, progress is being made to enhance the in-class student evaluation process.

21   End of module in-class evaluations are regarded as a positive initiative by both students and staff. Modules are reviewed annually through AQSG, and changes are made to modules through the annual curriculum review process. The module handbook template includes a section detailing changes made as a result of the previous year's module evaluation. The Foundation adheres fully to the annual monitoring process of each of its awarding bodies, however, the team was unable to identify an overarching formal process for the annual programme monitoring of its whole provision. The awarding bodies provide a single external examiner for validated awards and resulting reports are not academic programme specific.

22   The data submitted by the Foundation indicates high levels of retention rates of 89.6 per cent (2014-15), 81.6 per cent (2015-16) and 91.9 per cent (2016-17). Pass rates reported for completing students are 86.6 per cent (2014-15), 80 per cent (2015-16) and 87.2 per cent (2016-17).

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

23   The Foundation continues to demonstrate effective engagement with relevant external reference points through a variety of different approaches. The Foundation has continued to engage with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code). The Foundation provided a written response to the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assurance (UKSCQA) consultation on the review of the Quality Code.

24   In July 2017 an awareness raising exercise and review was undertaken with staff in relation to the Foundation's approach to *Chapter B5: Student Engagement* of the Quality Code. Academic malpractice procedures have also been reviewed in conjunction with Quality Code, *Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints* and Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) guidance, and a policy for proof reading was developed and benchmarked against similar documents at other institutions. The Foundation reviewed its policies on Fitness to Study, Fitness to Practice and the Code of Conduct in reference to guidelines produced by the OIA and benchmarked these against similar policies at other institutions. The Foundation developed a policy which drew on established good practice guidance from other Universities; Hospitality Policies and Procedures, guided by OIA training

regarding accommodation issues and good practice in this area. The revalidation process for the MA degree drew on a number of external reference points, including the Quality Code, FHEQ, Subject Benchmark Statements, and the Higher Education Academy Education for Sustainable Development document.

5 Background to the monitoring visit

25 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.

26 The monitoring visit was carried out by Dr Helen Corkill, Reviewer, and Mr Robert Saynor, Coordinator, on the 14 March 2018.