



## Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight: desk-based analysis of Trinity College Dublin at Belfast (formerly the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin at Belfast), May 2022

### Outcome of the desk-based analysis

1 From the annual return and documentary evidence, the monitoring team concludes that Trinity College Dublin at Belfast (the College) is continuing to maintain academic standards and the quality of student learning opportunities since the May 2021 [Higher Education \(Foreign Providers\) Review](#).

### Changes since the last QAA review

2 The provider's name has changed from 'Irish School of Ecumenics (Trinity College Dublin) at Belfast', to 'Trinity College Dublin at Belfast'. This is not a material change since it is not a change of legal or trading name. Rather, it better reflects an already existing situation in which the Irish School of Ecumenics comes under the newly-structured School of Religion, Theology and Peace Studies at Trinity College. There have been no changes of staff since the last review. There has been a slight increase in recruitment to the MPhil programme.

### Findings from the monitoring visit

3 The College has published an action plan to address the one recommendation and three areas of good practice identified in the May 2021 Higher Education Review (Foreign Providers) (HER (FP)). The action plan was approved by the Postgraduate Studies Committee of the School of Religion in October 2021.

4 The one recommendation from the HER (FP) was that clear and consistent feedback should be provided on all assessed student work to allow appropriate focus on academic development. The action was due to be completed by October 2021, with success indicators to be the implementation of a new rubric and evidence of consistent feedback, together with student satisfaction reports. The College subsequently presented a proposal to the Postgraduate Studies Committee of the School of Religion in October 2021 for a new feedback form to replace the older rubric used. This was agreed and will be implemented from September 2022 and included in the programme handbooks.

5 The Programme Handbook Policy stipulates that coursework requirements must be provided in programme handbooks, including marking conventions, rubrics and grading criteria. The 2021-22 programme handbook for the MPhil Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation includes outline generic marking criteria, broad grade bands and grade descriptors. Students had voiced concern in May 2021 that a rubric for coursework feedback should not be mentioned in the programme handbook if not going to be in use. This has been addressed for 2021-22. In addition, the College also provides helpful guides on essay writing, dissertation writing and assessment presentation, in addition to discussing assessment requirements with students.

6 The external examiner report of January 2022 for the Masters in Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation continues to confirm the very high standard of well-researched and thought-provoking work submitted on a programme considered to be stimulating, well-balanced and comprehensive. The external examiner noted a concern that the marking scheme and grading criteria for the programme were not included in the materials provided and were not set out in detail within the programme handbook. The College uses the School of Religion essay grading form, which sets out the criteria, but not the metrics or scoring tool associated with these. Writing guides have been provided to students. Grading criteria are included in programme handbooks and discussed in class. A new grading form with criteria is to be included in the programme handbook for September 2022. The external examiner considered feedback to students to be detailed and helpful, but that provision of detailed grading criteria would support expectations and consistency for marking as well as for more specific feedback. The external examiner also queried the clarity of the process in place for second marking and any subsequent reconciliation of marks. Blind second-marking is not used and markers mutually agree a final mark. This is in line with Trinity College regulations and staff are confident that integrity is upheld. However, the Graduate Studies Committee has now decided that an email trail should be retained to demonstrate the process of final mark agreement.

7 The College, along with the School of Religion, does not have a system of routine formal responses to external examiners. A formal response is only made if major problems are identified. Informal responses are sent to external examiners. Issues arising from reports are discussed and actioned through the Graduate Studies Committee.

8 Two of the areas of good practice identified relate to the unique learning opportunities embedded within the course - both the socio-political environment of the course location and the contribution of external academics drawn from different parts of the world. In both cases, the action plan outlines the intention to continue and enhance the range of resources and learning opportunities afforded by these two practices. In order to ensure continued enhancement, forward planning within available modules is essential well in advance of a forthcoming academic year. Detailed planning of a diverse range of complementary learning opportunities tied to the location in Belfast includes provision of a range of relevant field trips and guest lectures from diverse practitioners working in the local community.

9 The MPhil course also includes practice-orientated modules and placement learning, which the location of Belfast is particularly well placed to provide. The internship or placement elements continue to be underpinned by the necessary tripartite formal agreements between the placement provider, student and the College. Students are supported through the process by peer mentoring and occasional classroom-based sessions. In cases of unforeseen circumstances arising during placements, alternative arrangements for assessment may be facilitated by the College.

10 The range of specialist library facilities to which students have access was identified as the third area of good practice in the May 2021 HER (FP). The action plan identifies the need to maintain and enhance the library provision available to students. A review of the library provision specifically for conflict resolution was undertaken during the year.

11 The library at the College's campus in Belfast contains a significant subject-specific library. Library stock includes books and dissertations, which may be borrowed by students. The subject librarian issues an annual invitation to staff to order new books for the following academic year. The preferred format is now e-books, to maintain accessibility - partly in direct response to difficulties with access to library materials experienced during the pandemic. The librarians also provide online videos and tutorials. This library at Belfast is highly valued by students. In addition, the librarian provides sessions in accessing

appropriate resources and developing essential postgraduate skills. Students are also able to access some of the online resources and services available through Trinity College Dublin, including live tutorial sessions. Students have been raising the issue of an inter-library loan scheme between Dublin and Belfast for a number of years. Although this has been investigated, it is not possible to extend the scheme across the border into Northern Ireland. The College has an arrangement with the library at Queen's University Belfast and, where possible, membership is set up for the College's students. The library at Queen's University was not operational during the pandemic but reopened to associate members in September 2021. This provides 24/7 access to study space, as well as to book stock and other resources. The College pays for associated membership for its students.

12 The integration of the Belfast campus into the Trinity College Dublin IT infrastructure and network has facilitated the provision of online resources more fully. The online resources available through the Trinity College library are highly appreciated by students. The improved technology and video links have also helped to improve the integration of PhD students into the faculty in Dublin - for example, by facilitating the joint supervision by staff based in Belfast and Dublin. Dublin-based students are now able to be co-supervised by staff in Belfast.

### **Student data return**

13 The College currently has 13 students enrolled on the full-time MPhil/PgDip in Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation - an increase from eight recruited in 2020-21. Of the 13, 11 are international students. Four students are currently enrolled on the PhD course, one of whom started in September 2021. All students taking the MPhil in 2020-21 passed with distinction. There were no withdrawals on either the MPhil or the PhD.

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

14 The College has continued to engage actively with a range of external reference points. The provision at the College is governed by the policies and procedures of Trinity College Dublin, and the monitoring of these as required by both internal and external mechanisms. The College submits an Annual Quality Report (AQR) as is required of all Irish universities to Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). The QQI framework is closely aligned with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area 2015. The latest AQR report 2019-20, also notes the interaction of external quality framework requirements in Ireland with those of QAA.

15 QQI undertook an external Institutional Review of Trinity College Dublin in March 2022, to which academic and support staff from Trinity College at Belfast contributed.

16 The AQR report notes that external examiners play a vital role in the quality assurance and maintenance of academic standards of all Trinity College Dublin's programmes. External examiners for postgraduate taught programmes are appointed for a three-year term. The Dean of Graduate Studies receives the reports from external examiners after Courts of Examiners' meetings. External examiner comments are considered at the School Postgraduate Committee and the end-of-year course evaluation meeting. The programme handbook for the MPhil Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation sets out clearly the name and affiliation of the external examiner, and their role in the assessment process.

17 External examiners confirm the continued excellent use of the local context in Belfast as a backdrop for ethnographic teaching and learning activities. They also challenged the lack of marking criteria and consistency of structured feedback to students. The College has sought to address this and to align better with the Quality Code. To address

the latter, a new coursework feedback form has been developed. This will need to be monitored and evaluated during 2022 and 2023 (see paragraph 4).

18 During the period 2020-21, the central Quality Office at Trinity College Dublin evaluated all external examiner reports for experience of alternate assessment arrangements, attendance at virtual Courts of Examiners during the pandemic and use of the virtual learning environment.

19 The College makes good use of the Core practices of UK Quality Code for Higher Education as a reference (or cross-reference) point for policies and procedures, such as the Recognition of Prior Learning Policy, the Academic Awards Policy and the External Examiner Policy. The procedures for addressing complaints and appeals also align with Core practices, as identified in programme handbooks.

## **Background to the desk-based analysis**

20 The desk-based analysis 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 annual monitoring. 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 process or review.

21 The desk-based analysis was carried out by Dr Helen Corkill, Reviewer, and Millard Parkinson, QAA Officer, in May 2022. No meetings were held with students or staff, and the conclusions presented in this report are based on the analysis of documentary evidence submitted by the provider.

**QAA2665 - R13204 - Jun 22**

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2022  
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB  
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel 01452 557000  
Web [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)