



Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Union School of Theology, May 2019

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 Union School of Theology (the School) is making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the April 2018 [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#)

Changes since the last QAA review visit

2 In March 2018 the School underwent a successful institutional audit and validation visit from The Open University. In May 2018 the BA (Hons), G.Dip and M.Th programmes were subject to a successful validation visit from The Open University. All the conditions of the validation were fully met in August 2018, and subsequently the School became a partner school of The Open University. In addition, in March 2018, the School concluded a partnership agreement with the 'Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam' (VU) (formerly known as the Free University of Amsterdam) for the delivery of its PhD programme. UST supervisors work with doctoral students with a named VU faculty member who is the 'Promoter' on the supervisory team. UST supervisors and PhD candidates have full access to the VU e-library facilities.

3 There are currently 29 students in 'teach-out' with the University of Chester across the taught programmes, and a further four PhD students are registered with the University. 110 students are registered with The Open University on the BA, Graduate Diploma and MTh programmes. Three PhD students are registered with VU. There are in total 146 enrolled students on validated programmes, and a further eight students have been studying on the Global Ministry English Language Programme preparing them for IELTS, and Cambridge Language examinations. Overall the student population has increased by 30 per cent since April 2017. There are currently six full-time and two part-time academic staff, and nine full-time administrative and support staff. The School occupies the same premises as at the last review.

Findings from the monitoring visit

4 The School has made acceptable progress in monitoring, evaluating and enhancing its higher education provision through the systematic implementation of its action plan. Ongoing actions to support continuous improvement are discussed at regular Programme Committee and Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) meetings and Academic Board.

5 The School demonstrates its commitment to the continuous monitoring and review of its provision with recently implemented policies and processes for the design, development, approval and monitoring of its programmes (paragraphs 7 and 8); the student experience through engagement in academic meetings, and student feedback (paragraph 8); its engagement with the theological community at a local, national and international level during placements and strong relationships with church communities and Christian organisations; (paragraphs 10 and 11), and the learning and teaching environment with robust processes to monitor, review and quality assure admissions, assessment and

attendance (paragraphs 14-17). The School's learning community approach to support students on its distance learning provision is a unique selling point and continues to be good practice (paragraph 6). The action plan is not yet fully implemented and some elements are not required to be completed until July 2019.

6 The School's comprehensive framework supports the experience of distance learners. Regular Learning Community observation visits are undertaken to ensure quality assurance and to provide feedback that enables Lead Mentors to reflect on practice. These visits also connect students to campus-based academic staff to enhance the learning environment. Each learning Community Lead Mentor is supported by a School link tutor who provides feedback to Lead Mentors and students to support their learning. Additional mentor support is provided through meetings with the leaders of the Academic team at UST, including the Provost, Academic Dean, Programme Leader, and Academic Registrar during the Union Annual Conference and through induction and other professional development events. Attendance is monitored to ensure compliance with the requirements of the programme and to support individual academic success. Student progress and attainment levels are monitored at programme committee meetings and by external examiners.

7 The policy and processes for the design, development and approval of new programmes are well constructed and robustly supported by the awarding bodies, and were implemented fully in 2018-19. Validation and Programme proposals are approved by Academic Board before proceeding to the design phase in accordance with the requirements of each awarding body. Subsequent curriculum modifications are considered and classified at the programme-committee level, to determine the level of external examiner input and oversight required by the awarding body. The School is required to submit annual programme reports to each awarding body that inform their periodic institutional and programme level reviews. It is too early to evaluate the impact of these reports.

8 The School's attendance policy is robust and students are encouraged to engage fully with their studies and the wider aspects of school life. Student representatives attend the Academic Board, Quality Assurance Committee and Programme Committee meetings. Fellow students democratically select the lead representative, while other representatives volunteer to participate in meeting forums. The student participation rate at meetings is 75 per cent and the School has indicated that it will extend invitations to improve coverage in the coming academic year. Student feedback at a module, programme and School level is sought from all cohorts irrespective of mode or location of study.

9 There are robust policies and processes for the monitoring and review of the suitability of placement locations, providers, and placement supervisors through preparation and debrief of students, together with training/induction of placement providers.

10 During 2018-19 new arrangements for extended placements within the revised BA programme have been implemented. Students negotiate a placement to suit their individual requirements. Arrangements to support students and providers include; a risk assessment of all placement opportunities, and the identification of a suitably qualified supervisor who is a leading theological practitioner. Placement supervisors receive induction, training and guidance to support them in their role. Students receive an induction briefing to understand what is required of them and post placement reviews are implemented to ensure the providers are meeting the requirements of the School.

11 The School is committed to monitoring the impact of placements on employability. The strategic plan outlines the School's approach to employability and its commitment to developing strong relationships with church communities and Christian organisations. The School recently invited placement providers to review the placement policy identifying

the characteristics of a good placement and effective supervisors. The outputs of the process will be used to develop Best Practice Guidelines for Placements.

12 The School operates a comprehensive admissions process that is articulated clearly in its Admissions Policy. The process is managed by the Academic Registrar with oversight provided by the School Provost. The School remains committed to admitting students that show potential to complete the programme, and there is a robust process to review individual cases with non-standard academic backgrounds or qualifications.

13 The School promotes its programmes through a range of marketing materials and targets local, national and international conference events to attract potential candidates. To raise their profile and increase student numbers the School has recently invested in a full-time Recruitment, Communications and Development Officer who leads on recruitment and acts as the first point of contact for enquiries. On receipt of a formal application the Academic Registrar ensures the processes adhere to the School's admissions policy.

14 A process flow form records the stages of admission with applications reviewed by senior faculty members and the Programme Leader responsible for selecting interview candidates. A candidate checklist assesses interviewees against a series of criteria. The School has a detailed policy and procedure for assessing prior learning and students with non-standard prior learning can be asked to complete a diagnostic essay prior to or after the formal interview. The Director of Research and the potential student supervisor consider applications for research programmes. Admission is only considered if a suitable supervision arrangement can be provided at the School. Candidates that meet the School's requirements are referred to the awarding body, (VU), to decide if the applicant is required to undertake additional preparatory work as part of their Research Induction programme.

15 For all students, including those whose primary language is not English, admissions processes are fair, transparent and academically robust with set criteria, within the requirements of their awarding bodies. The School benchmarks its language requirements using standard IELTS outcomes with entrance to the various programmes differentiated according to the level of study. Overall, the application process provides the necessary checks to ensure an applicant's genuine intention to study and for unsuccessful candidates there is a clear process to appeal the decision.

16 The processes for setting, reviewing and quality assuring assessments are robust. They support student learning and achievement, and external examiners confirm all work is fairly marked against the learning outcomes they are designed to meet. All School assessments are internally verified by academic staff and externally approved by external examiners who confirm that programme standards are appropriate and consistent with the UK sector and map to the QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Theology and Religious Studies. Marking criteria are used to assess work against the validated programme learning outcomes with marks moderated according to School policy.

17 The Academic Misconduct Policy is introduced at induction sessions that focus on the avoidance of academic misconduct, its definition and consequences. All students are required to attend these sessions and confirm their understanding by completing the School's misconduct declaration form. All student work is submitted through anti-plagiarism software to assist the identification of plagiarised work.

18 The data on retention and achievement shows some year-on-year improvement in retention and progression across the portfolio of programmes. For students completing in 2018-19, across all programmes, retention rates have increased from 67 per cent to 98 per cent and achievement rates from 30 per cent to 75 per cent since 2016-17. Historically a number of students left programmes before completing their studies but analysis shows that all left due to genuine personal circumstances. The School has

enhanced the role of the Student Welfare Officer to be the Tutor for Well-being and Community with an extended hours contract and this may have had a positive impact on retention. The School has also strengthened the information given to students, emphasising the time commitment needed to be successful.

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

19 Ultimate responsibility for setting academic standards and ensuring that requirements of the relevant reference points are met lies with the awarding bodies for the School. The processes put in place ensure the awards are correctly positioned at the relevant level of the FHEQ and are aligned with Subject Benchmark Statements. The evidence shows the procedures to be effective and with due consideration given to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code), which is a key focus of the School. Expectations are addressed systematically with relevant mapping to both the Quality Code due to end in 2019 and the revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education, May 2019. The School uses relevant external reference points including QAA benchmarks, level descriptors and specialist input from external specialists from the field of study.

20 The School works in partnership with its awarding bodies, for taught programmes the OU, and with VU for its PhD programmes. This facilitates the sharing of good practice and ensures successful practices to confirm credit and qualifications are awarded only where learning outcomes and academic standards of the awarding body have been met. The School is continuing its collaboration with the University of Chester for the teach-out of its programmes

Background to the monitoring visit

21 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.

22 The monitoring visit was carried out by Dr Neil Lucas, Reviewer, and Dr Margaret Johnson, QAA Officer, on 14 May 2019.

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