



Annual Monitoring: desk-based analysis of Union School of Theology, April 2020

Outcome of the desk-based analysis

1 From the annual return and documentary evidence, the monitoring team concludes that the Union School of Theology (the School) is continuing to maintain academic standards and the quality of student learning opportunities since the May 2019 [annual monitoring visit](#).

Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 The School continues to deliver validated awards through the Open University (OU) and a partnership agreement with the 'Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam' (VU) (formerly known as the Free University of Amsterdam) for the delivery of its PhD programme.

3 There are currently 18 students in 'teach-out' with the University of Chester across the taught programmes, and a further two PhD students are registered with the University. 106 students are registered with the Open University on the BA, Graduate Diploma and MTh programmes. Six PhD students are registered with VU. There are in total, 132 enrolled students on validated programmes. Overall, the student population on validated programmes has decreased by 10% since May 2019. There are currently seven full-time and 14 part-time academic staff, and seven full-time administrative and support staff. The School has appointed a new Provost who will commence in post from May 2020. There will be a handover period with the existing Provost to ensure a smooth transition. The School occupies the same premises as at the last review.

Findings from the monitoring visit

4 The monitoring team analysed a range of documentary evidence, including the School's Annual Return, accompanying data sets and action plan - which has been reviewed and updated - all of which demonstrate that the School is continuing to maintain academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities.

5 The actions identified following the April 2018 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER (AP)) have all been addressed, with action points subject to internal monitoring processes. The one area of good practice has been consolidated, and the framework that supports Learning Communities clearly enriches the experience of distance learners (paragraph 7). The School has engaged with a range of external expertise and placement providers to identify best practice to enhance student experience and employability (paragraph 8). Progress has been made with the three affirmations to formalise processes for the design, development and approval of programmes (paragraph 9); to embed processes that ensure all students are fully engaged in the life of the School (paragraph 10); and developed arrangements for placement providers (paragraph 11).

6 The School continues to demonstrate its commitment to continuous monitoring and review of its provision and monitors quality and standards through a variety of processes and procedures. The Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) has delegated responsibilities for strategies and procedures for monitoring, measuring, initiating and reporting enhancement across the School's programmes. Quality enhancement is an agenda item for reporting to

the programme committees once a semester. The QAC receives reports from the programme committees, external examiners and external quality agencies which allows for monitoring and review of provision. The QAC reports to the Academic Board, which will include recommendations for enhancement. The School identifies actions as part of its ongoing quality improvement strategies, which are informed by student feedback and as part of the annual review and evaluation processes.

7 The good practice identified at the 2018 HER (AP) visit has been consolidated through the continued development of a framework that supports Learning Communities (LCs) and enriches the experience of distance learners. The School currently has 12 active UK-based LCs. The School undertakes on-site visits to each of these LCs every two years, with eight LCs visited during 2019. These visits are supported by observation forms. Student attendance across the LCs ranges from 77% to 100%. The Programme Leaders, Provost and other faculty members meet with Lead Mentors during the annual Union Conference held in September. Student progress is discussed at specific committee meetings. The external examiners' reports also provide details of student performance at the LCs. The School takes appropriate action from external reports which are formally recorded as part of the annual reporting to the awarding body. The School has a Link Tutor Policy and Process for supporting LCs' Lead Mentors on an ongoing basis. The Link Tutor submits a report of these meetings to the Programme Leader, who produces an annual report to the relevant programme committees. These reports highlight any issues related to student attendance, teaching and learning materials, good practice and suggestions for improvement. The School showcased its LCs at the Open University Partner Institution Day in May 2019.

8 The School has actively engaged with the expertise of placement providers to enhance the student experience and employability. This has included holding consultation events with a range of placement providers which also involved the Training Director of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches. These events resulted in the production of best practice materials. The School has in place a range of very positive UK and overseas partnerships to support staff and student exchanges, placement opportunities and the sharing of learning and teaching expertise.

9 The School has implemented further actions to embed the three affirmations identified at the April 2018 HER (AP) visit. The School has fully implemented the Policy for Programme Design, Redesign and Development, which has resulted in approval of revisions to several modules and assessment strategies (paragraph 14). These align with awarding body requirements and have involved the designated Academic Reviewer, appointed by the OU.

10 There is a clear commitment to ensure all students are fully engaged in the life of the School. In addition to the extensive student engagement strategies that the School has in place to involve the student body, the School has agreed that, from May 2020, a student representative will be present at meetings of the Board of Trustees of Union Foundation. There is continued close monitoring of student attendance in line with the School's Attendance Policy, including monitoring student representation on various academic committees (22 academic committee meetings have been held that student representatives are able to attend with an attendance rate of 73% - attendance target of 80%).

11 The School regularly monitors and reviews the suitability of placement locations and providers. Risk assessments have been completed and evaluated for each placement. Training and induction of placement providers has been completed, including extensive preparatory discussions with local placement supervisors, and briefings provided on the contents of the School's Placement Handbook. There is a clear overarching institutional strategic steer to support and enhance placement settings and employability of students.

12 The data on retention and achievement continues to show year-on-year improvement in retention and progression across the portfolio of programmes. From 2016-17 to 2018-19, retention rates have increased from 76% to 90%; and pass rates have increased from 81% in 2016-17 to 83% in 2017-18, with an overall pass rate for completing cohorts of 95% over this period. This increased pass rate is due to a significant number of learners completing early. The School maintains details of students who do not complete their studies and the analysis continues to show that all left due to genuine personal circumstances.

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

13 The School continues to demonstrate effective engagement with relevant external reference points through a variety of approaches. The School has continued to engage with the transition from the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) to the revised Quality Code.

14 A detailed mapping exercise to the revised Quality Code has been completed, which has been endorsed by the awarding body, and, as part of the School's policy and procedures monitoring schedule, alignment with the revised Quality Code will form part of the review processes of all policies and procedures. In January 2019, workshops were held to consider the Advice and Guidance on assessment and, in January 2020, work was undertaken to review the new Theology and Religious Studies Subject Benchmark Statement (SBS), and to align current provision in light of the SBS. All the School policies clearly make references to the Quality Code. The validation process for all the programmes through the Open University drew on a number of external reference points, including the Quality Code, *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, and relevant SBS.

15 Staff from the School have submitted papers at the International Society for Biblical Literature Annual Conference, the University of Edinburgh School of Divinity Research Seminar, and the University of Cambridge Divinity Faculty Research Seminar. Two current faculty members are Fellows of the Higher Education Academy (HEA), and the School librarian is an Associate Fellow of the HEA, with another faculty member in the process of working towards Fellowship status.

Background to the desk-based analysis

16 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 review/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.

17 The desk-based analysis was carried out by Robert Saynor, Reviewer, and Nadine Baker, QAA Officer, in April 2020. 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.

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