



Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Union Theological College, Belfast, October 2017

Section 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 Union Theological College, Belfast (the College) has made acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, evaluate and enhance its higher education provision from the October 2016 [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).

Section 2: Changes since the last QAA review

2 There have been no major changes since the Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) - HER (AP) - visit in October 2016. As at the time of the previous review visit, the College has approval from Queen's University Belfast (the University) to offer seven higher education programmes: a doctoral level programme, two master's degree programmes, a bachelor's degree with honours, and two bachelor's degree programmes, all offered in full and part-time modes of delivery. In addition, the College also continues to offer five higher education programmes on behalf of the Presbyterian Theological Faculty, Ireland (PTFI): two programmes at level 5, two programmes at level 6 and a bachelor's degree programme. At the time of the visit there were 233 students enrolled on the higher education programmes, a small increase from the time of the 2016 visit (198 students). There are nine full-time and 18 part-time academic staff.

Section 3: Findings from the monitoring visit

3 While all actions from the 2016 review have not been completed, there is sufficient evidence to indicate that the College is making acceptable progress in developing and implementing the action plan arising from the October 2016 HER (AP). Good practice continues to be embedded and enhanced through new initiatives to provide formal and informal opportunities for student and staff interaction. Admissions processes, academic quality monitoring and review activities, and student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement, take full account of UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) Expectations. Student completion and achievement data form an integral part of internal monitoring activities.

4 The College continues to foster and build on the strong sense of community and trust between students and staff. Students met during the visit were unanimous in their praise of the support provided by staff and the meticulous care taken to foster personal growth and academic attainment. The introduction this academic session of set College-wide morning coffee and lunch breaks has provided additional opportunities for students and staff to meet in an informal setting. Students and staff spoke enthusiastically about the success of this and gave examples of topics of general interest discussed.

5 The highly productive relationship between the College and the Church continues. Ministry students confirmed that their aspirations are supported fully by the College and Church through the provision of learning opportunities to support their placements in congregations throughout their period of study. The Church has made significant investment

in College buildings and infrastructure, and students commented favourably on the improvements made to the College entrance and reception area in particular.

6 The College has made slow but steady progress with implementing the recommendations and affirmations from the 2016 review. While work continues to formally document its academic framework for all PTFI awards, this has not been taken to a full conclusion. Discussions with staff indicated that a major contributing factor to the delay in completing this work arose from the outcomes of the University's Strategic Review of Theology and the subsequent continuing review and restructuring of the University's Bachelor's of Divinity (BD) programme. Staff indicated that while the PTFI BD programme has a similar content and structure to that of the University, there are 19 additional specific PTFI ministry pathway elements that must be taken into account either within the PTFI BD programme or Graduate Diploma. To ensure that PTFI programmes continue to dovetail with the University's programmes, staff indicated that this action could not be completed before the final outcome of the University's review process was known, which is now being addressed.

7 The College has completed a review and formally documented the PTFI Diploma in Ministry. Delivery of this programme started in September 2017. The review of all other PTFI awards is underway and due for completion in February 2018 for implementation in September 2018. The review process for the PTFI Diploma in Ministry was based on the University's quality assurance procedures. The development of formal documentation for the approval, amendment, monitoring and review of PTFI programmes continues and will be completed as part of the work to review the remaining PTFI awards.

8 The admission of students to University programmes is undertaken by the University through UCAS. Students enrolling for programmes leading to PTFI awards must be approved as students for the ministry by the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. The admissions process for all programmes is aligned to the Expectation of the Quality Code, *Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission to Higher Education*.

9 Applicants whose first language is not English indicate their English language competence through achieving the required admission criteria, where the medium of instruction is English. International students are required to achieve an overall International English Language Testing System score of 6.5, with no element being less than 5.5 for all entrants. Students confirmed that information on admission requirements is clearly and accurately presented on webpages and in promotional material.

10 As part of the University's Institute of Theology the College participates in the University's annual module and programme review process. PTFI programmes are subject to a similar process of scrutiny as the College seeks to ensure that outcomes and enhancements identified from monitoring and review of University programmes apply equally to PTFI programmes. Strategic oversight of student and programme performance is attained through a Quality Action Plan, which is monitored and reviewed at Quality Assurance Team meetings. The College's annual quality monitoring process ensures that the Expectation of the Quality Code, *Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review* is met.

11 Student feedback and input to the quality process is attained through discussion at Student Staff Consultative Committee meetings and through the College's student survey. All committees, including the College Management Committee, have student representation. Student representatives receive training on their role centrally at the University and individually from the College Principal on their appointment. In addition, all student representatives are given the opportunity to meet with the Principal as a group each term. The College Student Mentoring Programme provides another activity to encourage students to engage with their learning and the enhancement of their overall learning experience.

Students commented favourably on the benefits of the mentoring programme, and staff are encouraged by students' engagement with, and the success of, the programme.

12 Student achievement and completion data across all programmes remains steady year on year. In 2014-15, 58 students enrolled on University undergraduate programmes, of which 51 (88 per cent) achieved their intended final award. Statistics for University undergraduate programmes in 2015-16 are similar - 53 students enrolled, of which 48 (91 per cent) achieved their intended final award - as are those for 2016-17 - 50 students enrolled, all of whom are continuing their studies. Non-completing students - seven students (12 per cent) in 2014-15 and five (nine per cent in 2016-17) - either left the College or changed to another University programme. During the period 2014-15 to 2016-17, 45 students enrolled on University master's programmes, all of whom have either achieved their intended award or are continuing with their studies. Fifteen students enrolled on PTFI programmes in 2014-15, 19 students in 2015-16 and 17 students in 2016-17, with all but one student from the 2014-15 cohort (seven per cent) not achieving their intended award or continuing with their studies.

13 A thorough analysis of student retention and achievement data forms part of the annual monitoring process. The College has developed its assessment feedback process by increasing formative assessment opportunities, as a means of identifying students who may require additional academic support. Students indicated that the introduction of additional assessment feedback opportunities was a welcome enhancement to their learning experience.

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

14 The College continues to use the University as its main external reference point for quality and standards. While the awarding partners have ultimate responsibility, the College continues to work effectively within its partnership agreements to manage its own responsibilities for ensuring adherence to external reference points. This includes using the Quality Code as a key reference point to design policies and procedures for maintaining academic standards and quality for all higher education provision.

Section 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 Lynn Fulford, Reviewer, and Grant Horsburgh, Coordinator, on 19 October 2017.

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Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel 01452 557050
Web www.gaa.ac.uk