



Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Union Theological College, Belfast, October 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 Union Theological College (the College) is making progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the October 2017 [monitoring visit](#), but that further improvement is required.

2 Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 There have been no major changes since the monitoring visit of October 2017. The College continues to offer programmes leading to doctoral, master's and bachelor's awards from Queen's University Belfast (the University), as well as undergraduate programmes on behalf of the Presbyterian Theological Faculty Ireland (PTFI). The College has a total of 204 students, of whom 173 are enrolled on programmes leading to awards of the University and 31 are enrolled on programmes leading to PTFI awards. This represents a reduction in numbers since the previous year, when there were 233 enrolled students. The College has 22 academic staff of whom nine are full-time and 13 are part-time.

3 Findings from the monitoring visit

3 The College has made progress in addressing the outcomes of the report of the Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER (AP)), in 2016, but one recommendation and two affirmations have not yet been fully addressed (paragraphs 4-8). The continuing delay in fully and formally documenting the academic framework for PTFI programmes, and the non-completion of the alignment of PTFI programmes to FHEQ have the potential to put academic standards at risk. The Faculty meeting has not fulfilled its stated responsibility for monitoring and reviewing teaching, learning and assessment across all pathways and within all courses or modules, and this weakness in the College's maintenance of academic standards has the potential to put academic standards and quality at risk (paragraph 9). The College has addressed its action plan for the previous academic year effectively and has produced another for the current year (paragraph 9). The admission of students to programmes leading to awards of the University is subject to the processes of the awarding bodies and is not handled by the College. Students intending to enter the ministry of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) by enrolling for PTFI programmes, must first be formally approved as students for the ministry by the PCI (paragraph 10). The College has robust documented processes in place for the assessment of students (paragraph 13). External examiners provide regular and appropriate reports, but the lack of a formal defined mechanism to consider and respond to issues they raise is a weakness that has the potential to put academic standards and quality at risk (paragraph 14). There is a robust system in operation to detect and address weakness in students' academic writing (paragraph 15). Student completion and achievement data is systematically recorded and analysed (paragraph 16).

4 While the College has made some progress in addressing the outstanding actions from the 2016 HER (AP), its responses remain incomplete. Responses to the features of good practice, recommendations and affirmations in the 2016 this report have not

consistently been included in any of the College's published action plans, and it was unclear how the College exercises oversight of its responses to this report or whether it carries out any evaluation of these responses.

5 In respect of the recommendation to formally document the academic framework for all PTFI awards, the College received confirmation from the Department for the Economy of Northern Ireland in July 2018 that the PTFI has degree awarding powers for postgraduate awards but not for undergraduate awards, and that the PTFI has been added to the Education (Recognised Bodies) Order (Northern Ireland) 2018, thus formally establishing the basis on which postgraduate degrees can be awarded. The basis on which the College offers the programme leading to the award of the Bachelor of Divinity by PTFI remains unclear. Although there are at present no students enrolled on this programme, the College continues to offer this on its website. The College is currently undertaking further work with legal advisers with a view to fully addressing the recommendation by developing PTFI statutes and regulations.

6 The team heard that the College has documented and disseminated procedures for the approval, amendment, monitoring and review of PTFI programmes, although these procedures are described only in a document which is not referred to elsewhere. Nor was it clear from the minutes of the College Management Committee and of the Curriculum Panel whether these bodies had discussed and agreed the adoption of these procedures. While the College has taken steps to address the recommendation, it presented no evidence to show that it has embedded new procedures in its practice.

7 The College has completed the alignment of all but one PTFI programmes to the FHEQ, and the corresponding programme specifications have been approved by the College's PTFI Meeting in August 2018. The exception is the Bachelor of Divinity programme whose alignment remains incomplete, but continues to be offered on the College's website. No students are enrolled on this programme in 2018-19, and the College is reviewing the future of the programme. Nevertheless the lack of alignment of the Bachelor of Divinity programme constitutes a weakness in the College's maintenance of academic standards and has the potential to put standards at risk.

8 Although the steps being taken to provide training for student representatives were found to have been completed at the monitoring visit in 2017, the College has not taken a proactive approach to the appointment of student representatives in 2018-19 and no training has yet been arranged. While there is student representation on the Management Committee, the lack of student membership on any committee responsible for the quality of academic provision means that students have no formal means of expressing views about the quality of provision.

9 The College develops its own action plan for each academic year, based on feedback from student surveys, discussions in deliberative committee meetings, external examiner reports and departmental needs. Targets are set along with indicators of success, and progress against each action recorded. The team saw evidence of good progress in addressing all actions in the 2017-18 action plan in a thorough manner. A new action plan has been drawn up for the current academic year, which contains a wide range of items emanating from staff and student sources and includes the development of a range of online courses. The terms of reference of the Faculty meeting affirm that it is responsible for monitoring and reviewing teaching, learning and assessment across all pathways and within all courses or modules. However, minutes of meetings and explanations by staff did not demonstrate a thorough approach by the Faculty meeting in fulfilling this responsibility. This weakness has the potential to put academic standards and quality at risk.

10 The College does not handle student admissions. All students enrolling for programmes leading to the award of degrees by the University apply through UCAS and are accepted by the University in accordance with its own admissions processes. The University's website specifies the minimum educational entry requirements for programmes leading to its awards. Students enrolling for programmes leading to the award of qualifications by the PTFI and intending to enter the ministry of the PCI must first be formally approved as students for the ministry by the PCI through a process overseen by its Council for Training in Ministry.

11 Admission requirements for both the University and PTFI specify the required minimum level of qualification for students whose first language is not English. The College makes appropriate arrangements to provide remedial English support where required. Where possible, the College makes appropriate adjustments to its facilities to permit the admission of students with declared special learning needs or disabilities.

12 The College operates valid and reliable processes of assessment. By using the University's Student Disability Policy and Guidelines, the College ensures that appropriate adjustments are made to individual assessments to allow equitable provision for all students.

13 There are rigorous processes in place to ensure the equity and integrity of assessment. Assessment procedures for all University programmes follow the University's Guidelines for Teaching, Learning and Assessment. The College's Handbook contains the assessment policy for ministerial students. Staff have been provided with appropriate training in setting and marking assessment tasks and students receive the assessment policy and marking scheme at induction. Students confirm that they receive helpful detailed developmental feedback on their assignments which helps them improve. All summative assessment tasks are internally moderated prior to a sample being passed to the external examiner. Students confirmed that they are made aware of how to avoid academic malpractice at induction and through presentations. Submission of assignments through plagiarism-detection software is mandatory for postgraduate students and was recently introduced by the University on a trial basis for undergraduates.

14 External examiners receive a sample of all assessment tasks and provide the College with regular reports. While these reports are made available to the Examination Board, staff acknowledged the lack of a formal mechanism within the system of deliberative committees for discussing and responding to issues raised by external examiners on PTFI programmes. For example, an external examiner for PTFI programmes highlighted a lack of clarity as to what was expected of her, commenting on the facts that some scripts had no marks or marker's comments and that she had not been provided with the marking criteria. The team heard that these reports had been sent to an individual staff member and that the College was unsure whether, or how, the external examiner's comments had been addressed. The lack of systematic consideration of external examiners' reports is a weakness that has the potential to put academic standards at risk.

15 The College's analysis of all scripts submitted by students to identify training needs in regard to writing skills has revealed the continuing need for support in this area. Students confirmed that they receive written guidance on citing and referencing and that additional support is available from academic staff.

16 Student achievement and completion data across all programmes remains consistent from year to year. In 2015-16, 53 students enrolled on University undergraduate programmes, of whom 48 (91 per cent) achieved their intended final award. Statistics for University undergraduate programmes in 2016-17 and 2017-18 are similar, with 50 students enrolled each year, of whom 49 and 44 (98 and 88 per cent) respectively are continuing their studies. Non-completing students - one (two per cent) in 2016-17 and six (twelve per cent) in

2017-18) - either left the College or changed to another University programme. During the period 2015-16 to 2017-18, 48 students enrolled on University master's or doctorate programmes, all of whom have either achieved their intended award or are continuing with their studies. Fifteen students enrolled on PTFI programmes in 2015-16, 17 students in 2016-17 and 17 students in 2017-18, with all either achieving their intended award or continuing with their studies.

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

17 The College has continued to use the University as its main external reference point for quality and standards. The University has recently undertaken a review of its relationship with the College in September 2018, and the report of this review is not yet published. The UK Quality Code for Higher Education and Subject Benchmark Statements are effectively used as reference points when designing or revising procedures and programme specifications to maintain academic standards and the quality of provision.

5 Background to the monitoring visit

18 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.

19 The monitoring visit was carried out by Mr Mike Coulson (Reviewer), and Dr Stephen Ryrie (QAA Officer) on 18 October 2018.

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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