



Educational Oversight: report of the desk-based analysis of Union Theological College, Belfast, May 2020

Outcome of the desk-based analysis

1 From the annual return and documentary evidence, the monitoring team concludes that the Union Theological College (the College) is continuing to maintain academic standards and the quality of student learning opportunities since the May 2019 [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).

Changes since the last QAA review

2 The undergraduate programmes previously offered have been discontinued by the awarding body, Queen's University Belfast (QUB), and are currently being taught out, with 71 students due to complete in this academic year.

3 The part-time Master of Theology in Reformed Theology and PG Certificate in Greek are delivered online (no block teaching sessions), while students on the PTFI PhD programme are not required to fulfil any residency requirements but frequently opt to spend an extended period of one or two weeks at the College to complete research in the Library and to consult with their supervisor. These programmes are awarded by the Presbyterian Theological Faculty, Ireland (PTFI). There are currently 30 students on these programmes and three on PhD programmes. In addition, there are three Master of Theology students, one Master of Research (Theology) and 10 PhD students on QUB programmes.

4 The College is currently developing an agreement with a new university to deliver undergraduate programmes from September 2021. Otherwise, there have been no significant changes since the last report.

Findings from the monitoring visit

5 The review was carried out as a desk-based process. The review team examined the self-assessment Annual Submission document and supporting evidence. Additional evidence was requested and provided which enabled the team to reach an outcome. Progress has been made against the good practice identified in the previous report (paragraph 6) and against the affirmation (paragraph 16). There were nine recommendations listed in the previous report and the College has made acceptable progress in addressing each of these recommendations (paragraphs 7-15).

6 The College has continued to strengthen the identified **good practice** in its approach to pastoral care for all students, and their integration in a wide range of community activities, which strongly support students' personal and professional development (Expectation B4). Further additional space for study and quiet reflection for all college-based students has been provided. Clarity on the facilities, support arrangements and regulations applying to each programme has been improved by the replacement of one overarching handbook by individual programme handbooks. All students on PTFI programmes, whether college-based or studying online, are part of the Personal Tutoring Programme and have equal access to all support systems and resources which contribute to their personal and professional development. While the vast majority of PTFI students are preparing for

ordination in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI), or are already in ministry or employment, specific extra-curricular events have been provided for students on QUB programmes to improve their employability prospects, which students have appreciated.

7 Appropriate steps have been taken to ensure that the lines of reporting in the governance structure are aligned with responsibilities for academic authority (Expectation A2.1). The College has revised the academic committee structure and described the function of the various bodies, together with the timely reporting framework, in an agreed governance document. The effectiveness of these new arrangements, which commenced operation in autumn 2019, will be evaluated after 18 months. Following scrutiny of the initial evidence provided for this review, the terms of reference for Faculty were amended to include the responsibility for approving, monitoring and implementing the College's Externality Policy (which includes the receipt of and response to reports from external examiners). College policies and procedures have been revised in accordance with the new committee structure and published on the website. Minutes of academic committees indicate a clear communication process with regard to the revised governance structure.

8 Commendable progress has been made to ensure that the approval of new programmes includes scrutiny by independent external academic expertise (Expectations A3.1, A3.4 and B1). The College has established a Higher Education Advisory Panel (HEAP) consisting of a number of appropriately qualified and experienced external academic and quality assurance professionals. The clear terms of reference include the scrutiny of new programmes and major changes to existing programmes, as well as providing advice to the College Faculty. An initial meeting of the panel in February 2020 provided an introduction to its remit and function, as well as helpful external advice to improve the provision. The next meeting is planned for 1 July 2020.

9 Clear arrangements have been put in place to ensure that the process for approval of new programmes, and of changes to programmes, is consistently applied (Expectation B1). The updated Programme Design and Review Policy and procedures - which now reflect the revised committee structure and include a checklist - have been approved by the relevant committees. The process has been consistently applied to the revision of three existing programmes and the development of three new programmes, culminating in their final approval by PTFI in June 2019.

10 Progress has been made to establish, implement and ensure staff and student awareness of processes for the prevention, detection and consequences of academic misconduct (Expectation B6). The Academic Integrity Policy has been updated to reflect the new Academic Misconduct procedure. Both have been approved by Faculty, clearly explained at induction and made available to PTFI students. In addition, plagiarism-detection software has been implemented, communicated to students and appropriate training provided. There have been no instances of academic misconduct detected during the current academic year.

11 Progress has been made to establish and implement effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and review of programmes (Expectations B8, B7 and A3.2). A defined timetable for three-yearly periodic review, embedded within the Strategic Enhancement Timetable, has been clearly laid out and agreed by Faculty with the next review taking place in June 2021. Programmes and modules are monitored regularly and reviewed annually by the relevant departments, with the process for the current academic year now well under way. Module reviews are carried out by each department for the previous semester on the basis of external examiner reports and student evaluations. These inform the Annual Programme and Module Review meeting, which is followed by Faculty approval of any required changes to modules and programmes.

12 The College has made acceptable progress to establish, implement and effectively manage secure arrangements for the delivery of learning opportunities in student placements (Expectation B10). A Work Based Learning Opportunities Policy was been devised to detail the implementation and secure management of student placements. The policy is scheduled for review to ascertain the extent of its effectiveness in June 2020. As only a very small number of students are currently undertaking a short placement where they conduct one worship service with a member of Faculty acting as the placement supervisor, evidence is limited. However, the College has created a suitable framework of arrangements, including the need for risk assessments to be provided, for the effective management of more substantial placements in the future - which particularly applies to the Postgraduate Diploma in Ministry programme.

13 The College has taken effective steps to fully embed the strategy for enhancement in the College's planning processes (Enhancement). An Annual Evaluation Report and Strategic Enhancement Action Plan have been prepared and approved in order to communicate the College's enhancement priorities, explicitly linking strategic decisions to quality assurance processes and initiatives, including input from staff and students, to support student learning. The Annual Report refers to the required actions resulting from the review team's findings as well as a revision of the PFTI programmes offered. The updated Learning and Teaching Strategy includes relevant aspects of the strategy for enhancement. The Strategic Enhancement Timetable is kept under review by the Teaching and Learning Panel, the Management Committee and the Quality Action Panel.

14 The College has made acceptable progress to establish and systematically implement the learning and teaching strategy in respect of programmes taught in the College (Expectation B3). The Learning and Teaching Strategy was prepared in consultation with students and approved by Faculty, and subsequently the Teaching and Learning Panel, and is kept under review by the Academic and Student Affairs Panel (ASAP). The objectives, measures and timescales were set against each of the strategic priorities for 2019-20. As required by the Learning and Teaching Strategy, module reviews - including the collection of student feedback through written surveys - were carried out in early 2020 for all modules that ran in the first semester of the current academic year and subsequently discussed at departmental level. The ASAP provided a progress report on the implementation of the Strategy, which was accepted by Faculty and deemed to be complete in February 2020.

15 The College has made limited progress to ensure that the appointment of full-time academic staff take account of the diversity and needs of all students in order that individual students are able to develop and achieve their academic, personal and professional potential (Expectation B4). Although the report from last year's full review states that 'the College has acknowledged the desirability of making urgent progress to appoint female members of Faculty staff', there are no female academic staff who are directly employed by the College, although four self-employed female lecturers teach either the whole or part of a module and a further 15 are employed by other organisations and teach a very small number of hours annually. A task group appointed to explore the issue of diversity has produced a report, subsequently accepted by the Management Committee, noting that the main issue of diversity is in regard to gender, emphasising the beneficial nature of having female members of Faculty as good role models and recommending appropriate affirmative action in advertising and recruitment processes. The College currently anticipates opportunities for full-time teaching roles arising in the forthcoming academic year. The team noted that teaching staff are appointed to the College by the PCI and are then inducted by the College. Although the Management Committee agreed that, in the interim, consideration be given to a part-time member of academic staff taking a pastoral role with female students, no such appointment has been made. However, prior to the COVID-19 lockdown the female Assistant Chaplain from QUB attended the College once a week to interact with, and provide support to, female students. The Postgraduate Scholarship Policy has been revised to

include the aim of increasing gender diversity, with special consideration to be given to female applicants for scholarships.

16 Progress has been made on the **affirmation** of the steps being taken to formalise and implement the process for consideration of and responding to external examiners' reports (Expectation B7). The College is taking effective action to ensure that the Externality Policy is fully implemented in terms of the appointment of and reporting by external examiners. PTFI external examiner reports are made available to all PTFI students and are used effectively within the module review processes. The terms of reference for the Faculty have recently been revised to include the overarching responsibility for receiving and responding to reports from external examiners. For example, a comment from one external examiner regarding a significant difference in marks awarded by the first and second markers was investigated, discussed at departmental level, noted by Faculty and responded to appropriately.

17 No external reviews have taken place. Discussions with another university regarding undergraduate provision are ongoing and await full approval of a formal relationship by the General Assembly of the PCI in June 2020, although this may be delayed by the current COVID-19 crisis.

18 The pass rates and completion of programmes in 2018-19 compares favourably with performance in recent years. Further details and reflection on retention, completion and pass rates for QUB programmes, are contained in the Continuous Action for Programme Enhancement (CAPE) Report for 2018-19. Figures for 2018-19, the last available at the time of the review, showed a 100% retention rate across all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.

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

19 The College has given appropriate consideration as to how it is managing the transition to the revised Quality Code for Higher Education by reflecting as to what extent it meets the Expectations and practices for standards and quality laid out in the new Quality Code. A thorough exercise has been carried out to map priorities, policies and procedures against the relevant guiding principles laid out in the Advice and Guidance documents which accompany the 12 associated themes. Actions arising from this exercise will be addressed by Faculty within the annual programme reviews of June 2020, the annual review of policies and in identifying strategic priorities in the drafting of the Annual College Report (August 2020).

20 Other external reference points are the college's relationships with PTFI and Queen's University Belfast, through ongoing liaison and external examiner reports, as well as the implementation of its Higher Education Advisory Panel (HEAP) as an external reference point earlier this year.

Background to the desk-based analysis

21 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.

22 The desk-based analysis was carried out by Mike Coulson, Reviewer, and Millard Parkinson, QAA Officer, in May 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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