



Educational Oversight: desk-based analysis of Union Theological College, Belfast, May 2024

Outcome of the desk-based analysis

1 From the annual return and documentary evidence, the monitoring team concludes that Union Theological College, Belfast (the College) is continuing to maintain academic standards and the quality of student learning opportunities since the [May 2023 Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).

Changes since the last QAA review

2 There are currently 116 students enrolled at the College, representing a small increase on last year. There are eight full-time members of staff and one part-time academic. There are also seven full-time members of professional support and administrative staff. There have been no changes to awarding bodies since the Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER(AP)). The main change has been that the Principal stepped down from the Principalship on 31 August 2023 and remains at the College as Professor of New Testament; the Vice-Principal took up the Principalship on 1 September 2023. QAA was informed of this change.

Findings from the monitoring visit

3 Actions in response to the two recommendations from the HER(AP) in 2023 have been effectively progressed since the review. Actions in respect of improved information for unsuccessful applicants have been completed (paragraph 4). Actions in respect of providing information about undergraduate student access to the complaints procedure of the awarding body (St Mary's University, Twickenham) once all internal avenues have been exhausted, have also been completed (paragraph 5).

4 In relation to the above, the review conducted in May 2023 identified two recommendations for the provider to consider. The first recommendation was that the provider should provide clear and transparent information for unsuccessful applicants that includes information related to their ability to appeal an admissions decision. The provider now includes clear information to unsuccessful applicants in the letter templates that are used when an application is unsuccessful. The letter template clearly explains how students can both appeal a decision and make a complaint about the admissions process. Links are also included to the provider's admissions policies for Presbyterian Theological Faculty, Ireland applicants and on their website. These include further information about the process that an unsuccessful applicant should follow. This, therefore, now gives confidence that the unsuccessful applicant can easily access clear and transparent information about their ability to appeal an admissions decision.

5 The second recommendation made in the review was that the provider should ensure that full and accurate information is provided for students on the process for making complaints, aligned with the requirements of the awarding body. The College now provides information in the Student Complaints Procedure about how, when the internal complaints procedure has been exhausted, an undergraduate student may appeal to the awarding body. This information is also provided in the College Users Handbook for 2023-24. The Student Survey now includes a question about students' knowledge of the complaints procedure - the inclusion of this question will help the college to assess whether students are aware of the process since the survey forms part of the discussions of the Education Committee.

6 The College has therefore effectively responded to the two recommendations made in the May 2023 review and has put in place appropriate measures to monitor the ongoing effectiveness of these measures.

7 The College offers one undergraduate and six postgraduate taught programmes, and also recruits to a PhD programme. The undergraduate programme has recruited for two academic years and retention in 2022-23 was 100% (11 students); to date in 2023-24, one student has exited the programme. No students have yet completed the programme.

8 Five of the six postgraduate programmes are delivered online and in 2022-23 these programmes recruited 64 students; retention rates for these programmes range from 75% to 100%. The 75% relates to the loss of one student from a cohort of four, otherwise the range is 95%-100%. 12 students have completed these programmes in 2022-23 and all received commendations or distinctions. The sixth postgraduate taught programme - the Master of Divinity - is delivered residentially and part-time. Retention levels for this programme are 100% (21 students) and in 2022-23, five students completed their programme with all achieving either a commendation or distinction.

9 In response to lower retention levels (85%, 26 students) in the MA Theology programme in 2021-22, the College has sought to provide prospective applicants with the opportunity to discuss their application and the course to help students make informed decisions prior to the course beginning.

10 Retention levels are comparable across both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and between the two postgraduate taught modes of delivery. One student successfully completed their PhD in 2022-23 and one student exited without completion - their withdrawal reduced the retention rate from 100% to 88% (nine students).

11 The College continues to draw upon external opportunities and expertise to inform practice within the institution. In January 2024, the College reviewed its committee structure and, as a result, amended the terms of reference for the Research Committee and added a new external representative with PGR expertise. The College continues to be intentional in the way that it uses data to review student experience and achievement. It also engages annually with its awarding body for the undergraduate programme to further enhance provision, the student experience and student achievement.

12 Students are well supported at the College. The publication of an updated, clear and detailed policy covering all aspects of the admissions process ensures they are well informed prior to enrolment; this has now been augmented with opportunities to visit the campus in advance of enrolment. The detailed programme specifications, the comprehensive and student-friendly handbook, and the support offered towards student wellbeing all give confidence that students are well supported, and that the provider continues to explore how to further enhance provision.

13 There is evidence of continuous enhancements in assessment to make them more diverse, innovative and professionally relevant. This includes the use of podcasts with supportive guidance for students on how to make them. These are new so have not yet been evaluated. The recent updating of the Style Guide and Academic Integrity Policy means that they now include guidance on the use of generative artificial intelligence as a source. The College has also introduced a M-level thesis deposit scheme which means that future students can consult previous dissertations and identify examples of good practice.

14 The College updated its strategic plan in 2023 to include a QAA action plan following the HER(AP) report in 2023. This includes actions to further develop the well-embedded culture of research and scholarly activity. The good practice identified in module and programme reviews for 2023 includes effective use of PhD students from the College and Queen's University Belfast as Recognised Teachers to share their research and encouraging the College's students to attend academic conferences. The symposia and conferences taking place in this academic year on site, plus the schedule of attendance for staff and PhD students presenting elsewhere, demonstrate the planned increase in activity.

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

15 The College continues to use appropriate external reference points to meet expectations for higher education, including the revised Quality Code for Higher Education and *The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*. This is demonstrated in the detailed programme specifications and policies such as those for admissions and academic integrity. The College underwent a successful UKVI compliance visit in October 2023. In January 2024, the College successfully applied for the specific designation of its undergraduate course for Student Finance and Disabled Students' Allowances and for Disabled Students' Allowances for its postgraduate courses.

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 Dr Gareth Longden, Reviewer, and Dr Jennifer Cann, QAA Officer, in May 2024. 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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Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel 01452 557000
Web www.qaa.ac.uk