



## Review for Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Union Theological College, Belfast, May 2022

### 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; UTC) is making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the May 2021 [Educational Oversight monitoring visit](#).

### Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 Union Theological College (UTC) is the training college for the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. UTC holds a Royal Charter to award postgraduate degrees under the Presbyterian Theological Faculty, Ireland (PTFI). To date, its undergraduate programmes have been accredited by Queen's University, Belfast (QUB), but teach-out of these arrangements is now in its final stages and a new undergraduate degree will commence in September 2022 with St Mary's University, Twickenham as the awarding body. In addition to academic awards, UTC delivers ministry training for the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. This is in the form of Council for Training in Ministry (CTM) modules which do not contribute to an accredited award. While many of the students who are enrolled on the CTM courses to train for the ministry are also enrolled on master's programmes, a number will only be taking CTM courses at UTC.

3 The College currently has a total headcount of 88 students (full-time equivalent of 33 students). This number comprises: four part-time undergraduate students on programmes validated by Queen's University, Belfast; 32 ministry students, of whom 22 are taking the Master of Divinity validated by the Presbyterian Theological Faculty, Ireland (PTFI); 54 part-time online postgraduate students; and eight PhD students, of which one is registered with QUB and the other seven with PTFI.

4 The College continues to teach out programmes which were validated by QUB. These are two undergraduate programmes - a Bachelor of Divinity and a Bachelor of Theology - and a PhD programme. There are four part-time students remaining on the two undergraduate programmes, three of whom will be graduating in July 2022 and the other in July 2023. Individual teach-out plans, agreed with the University and the student, are in place for each student. There is one student remaining on the QUB PhD programme who is due to complete in 2022.

5 UTC offers six programmes which are awarded by the Presbyterian Theological Faculty, Ireland (PTFI). Five of these programmes - Postgraduate Certificate in Biblical Greek; MTh Reformed Theology; MTh New Testament; MTh Old Testament; and MA Theology - are delivered online. The Master of Divinity is a part-time residential programme which has replaced a Postgraduate Diploma in Ministry. All of the students enrolled in the final cohort of the PgDip in Ministry successfully completed at the end of the 2020-21 academic year. While UTC offers the MA Theology and the qualification is awarded by PTFI, it is taught by the [BibleMesh Institute](#) under a Memorandum of Agreement.

6 The College runs a course for the Council for Training in Ministry (CTM) which all 32 Ministry students are taking. As noted above, 22 of those Ministry students are also enrolled on the MDiv programme at the College; a further three of the Ministry students are enrolled on other online master's programmes. In addition, another seven students from other programmes are enrolled on the CTM course as a standalone unit. The course does not offer an academic award.

7 A new undergraduate programme - BA (Hons) Theology - validated by St Mary's University, Twickenham, will have its first intake of students in September 2022. The target intake is 20 full-time students. These students will be enrolled as UTC students rather than St Mary's students.

8 Two permanent members of staff left UTC in 2021, and three new lecturers joined the College. One of these will be responsible for coordinating the BA (Hons) Theology when it commences in September 2022. A Professor of Ministry, who provides support to the Ministry students on a one-to-one basis, joined the College in 2021. This gives a total of seven full-time staff and 13 part-time staff, which compares with six full-time staff and 16 part-time staff in 2021.

## Findings from the monitoring visit

9 The review team analysed the Annual Monitoring Return and the supporting evidence submitted by UTC, met with members of the management team and faculty, and talked with students. The team concludes that the College is making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision. It has implemented a Strategic Enhancement Plan (paragraph 10) and uses its monitoring and review processes to respond to issues raised by students, faculty and external examiners (paragraph 14). The committee structure remains under review (paragraph 12). Student engagement has been strengthened through their representation on various committees (paragraph 14) and students are effectively supported both academically and in terms of their pastoral needs (paragraphs 15-17). UTC has in place an Annual Review procedure and has reintroduced its Annual Student Survey (paragraph 20). The College was also subject to an external review by St Mary's University, Twickenham as part of the validation process for the bachelors programme (paragraph 21). The Advice and Guidance of the revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education was embedded in the College's policies in 2020 (paragraph 23).

10 UTC implemented an extensive action plan to respond to the seven recommendations from the Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER(AP)) of 2019, and to build on the good practice identified by the review team. The majority of actions were completed in 2019. UTC has continued to evaluate the impact of actions taken, and has drawn up a detailed Strategic Enhancement Plan for 2021-22 which is monitored through the committee structure and is regularly reviewed by the Head of Academic Administration.

11 At the end of each teaching semester, UTC reviews all modules using a module review form which incorporates comments from the tutor and the external examiner, and includes student feedback from the module evaluation questionnaires. Module review forms are discussed at a Module Review meeting which includes faculty and student representatives to enable a comprehensive consideration of all responses at both department and faculty levels, and to support the identification of synergies or common themes in feedback across modules. The outcomes of the meeting are considered at Faculty meetings. Recommendations arising from this process for changes to assessment and key texts are discussed with staff, students and the external examiner and referred to the Academic and Student Affairs Panel (ASAP) for approval.

12 In response to recommendations from the HER(AP) of 2019, UTC revised its governance structures, which included the introduction of two new committees - the Quality Action Panel (QAP) and the Academic and Student Affairs Panel (ASAP). As part of its ongoing review, the College brought these two committees together for joint meetings in the second semester of 2020-21 and the first semester of 2021-22. However, UTC has subsequently decided to return to separate meetings for ASAP and QAP, as it considers this provides for a more focused approach to the content of the agenda. However, from an examination of the minutes of the meetings of the two committees, the review team was of the opinion that there was an overlap in the matters discussed and was, therefore, unconvinced by the College's suggestion that greater efficacy is achieved by maintaining two separate committees.

13 UTC has effectively used the Programme Design and Module Review Policy for the validation of the online MA Theology programme delivered by BibleMesh Institute. The schedule of responsibilities has been updated to reflect the new relationship and includes the requirement that UTC will approve teachers for the course. The external examiner, who has oversight of Level 7 qualifications delivered by UTC as well as the Level 7 qualification delivered by BibleMesh, has confirmed that standards across the two providers are consistent. The MTh Old Testament has also been developed and approved in accordance with the College's Programme Design and Module Review Policy.

14 In response to the comments relating to increasing student engagement contained in the Annual Monitoring Report of 2021, UTC has appointed additional student members to the QAP and ASAP, and the Student Transitions Task Group has been set up to take forward a number of the outcomes of the Strategic Enhancement Plan. While UTC acknowledges that it is difficult to encourage students who are studying online to be fully involved in the deliberative committee structure, they have found that, by explaining to students the value of being a student representative in terms of their future employability skills, more students have been willing to stand as representatives.

15 UTC has continued to provide effective support for students. A new Student Disability Policy was approved in December 2021. The College Disability Officer has established links with an Education Assessor and Needs Assessment Centre at QUB as part of ongoing collaborative working to ensure that the College provides appropriate support and makes reasonable adjustments for its students on the basis of specialist assessment and advice. Further support for student wellbeing will be introduced through a contract with 'Inspire Wellbeing' - an independent, confidential student counselling service which is available to all part-time and full-time students across several of the higher education providers in Northern Ireland. This will provide dedicated counselling and wellbeing support to UTC students from September 2022. Students studying at the College participate in daily coffee breaks with staff and can attend weekly worship. Those studying online have been able to participate in virtual cafés and the online programme forum where they provide peer-to-peer support.

16 Concerns were raised by Ministry students to Faculty - the senior academic committee of UTC - regarding family pressures experienced by students that were highlighted during the pandemic. Faculty set up a Ministry Student Working Group which included staff and students, and this Working Group produced a revised extenuating circumstances policy and introduced a Leave of Absence Policy and a Maternity/Paternity/Adoption Policy. The new policies were approved by the Ministry Students Council and Faculty.

17 The College considers the Personal Tutoring system to be a key factor in enabling student achievement. As a small institution, all students are known to staff on an individual basis and there is a range of informal mechanisms for students to seek advice in addition to

the structured Personal Tutoring system. The system is currently being reviewed to ensure it continues to meet the differing needs of its various student groups. Students confirmed that they have one initial meeting with their Personal Tutor at the beginning of the semester and can ask to meet them as the need arises. They spoke positively of the accessibility of all staff, noting that a designated Personal Tutor was the first point of contact for a range of queries, and gave positive examples of support that had been provided in various circumstances.

18 The College has policies in place that support a structured approach to strategy and planning, and monitoring and evaluation, and the review team saw evidence of how this operated in practice. UTC has produced a detailed Annual Report which incorporates the Teaching and Learning Strategy. This was approved by the College's Management Committee and has been published on the website. The Strategic Enhancement Plan for 2021-22 is based on the outcomes of the five-year Teaching and Learning Strategy. UTC reviews its policies and procedures every three years and updates them annually.

19 The College's procedures require it to undertake an internal periodic review every three years. This considers the activities of UTC in relation to PTFI awards to ensure they align with the UK Quality Code; provides a report of the findings to the UTC Management Committee; and requires an action plan in response to the outcomes of the report. Originally scheduled for October 2021, the periodic review will now take place in the summer of 2022. This was postponed due to extensive work being undertaken on the validation of the new undergraduate programme with St Mary's University, Twickenham.

20 Although the formal Annual Student Survey was not carried out in 2020-21, UTC collected and responded to student feedback obtained through a range of formal and informal mechanisms, including a special mid-semester survey (Ministry students), amended module evaluation questionnaires and tutor evaluation questionnaires (PTFI students), the QUB Student Voice Committee and through annual programme reviews which list the 'most helpful' and 'least helpful' aspects of the programme. Action taken in response to feedback includes explaining the purpose of feedback on assessed work and the review of the referencing systems by ASAP. The College confirmed that the Annual Student Survey is being implemented this year and students are currently responding to the questionnaire. A 50% response rate has been achieved so far. The outcomes of the survey will be considered by the meeting of ASAP in June 2022.

21 St Mary's University, Twickenham undertook an external review of UTC as part of the validation process for the BA (Hons) Theology. The initial approval report contained several conditions and recommendations, to which UTC has effectively responded. These included revising the schedule of responsibilities, providing a programme specification and module specifications. St Mary's University, Twickenham approved the amended documentation in November 2021, and the five-year memorandum of agreement has been signed by both parties. UTC will adopt the monitoring systems of St Mary's University, Twickenham for the BA (Hons) Theology programme.

22 The degree classifications for students following the two QUB-accredited undergraduate programmes are positive. The Bachelor of Divinity degree has shown a steady improvement in student achievement over the past five years. In 2020-21, 25% of students achieved a first-class honours degree and the remaining 75% achieved an upper second-class honours. The first cohort of the BA (Hons) Theology degree graduated in 2021 with one student achieving a first-class honours, 12 an upper second, and three a lower second. Retention rates across programmes are 100%, with the exception of the Postgraduate Certificate in Biblical Greek which has a retention rate of 67%. However, this reflects a small number of students on the course (three), one of whom discontinued the

course. External examiner comments on the curricula, teaching, assessment and academic standards of programmes are positive.

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

23 UTC makes use of the Advice and Guidance in the revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) and reviewed its policies and procedures in June 2020 to ensure they aligned with the revised Quality Code. The Core and Common practices of the Quality Code are embedded in the Admissions, Recruitment and Widening Access Policy, and the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Policy. The Assessment Policy aligns with the Quality Code and provides for students to receive full details of the assessment process. All assessment briefs are scrutinised by an external examiner and students receive detailed feedback on their assessments. External examiners moderate samples of assessed work and their reports are positive. The student complaints, concerns and appeals procedures for both undergraduate and postgraduate students were approved in 2020-21 and updated in 2021-22. The Programme Development and Review Policy, which governs the development and review of PTFI-accredited programmes, has been effectively used to introduce a new programme - MTh Old Testament.

24 Staff with whom the review team met, indicated that the Advice and Guidance of the Quality Code was embedded in the College's Teaching and Learning Strategy. The extent to which all staff understood how this then translated into practice, however, was unclear. This may present some limitations to the effectiveness of the College's approach and, in particular, to how the Quality Code can be used in a systematic way to enhance the quality of their teaching.

## **Background to the monitoring visit**

25 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.

26 The monitoring visit was carried out by Brenda Eade, Reviewer, and Dr Demelza Curnow, QAA Officer, on 17 May 2022.

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