



Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) of Union Theological College, Belfast

May 2023

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About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Union Theological college, Belfast. The review took place from 16 to 17 May 2023 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Dr John Deane
- Dr Richard Samuels
- Ms Sarah Mullins

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provision and to make judgements as to whether or not academic standards and quality meet UK Expectations. These Expectations (and the associated Core and Common practices) are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code)¹ setting out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and of each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

In Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
 - the setting and maintenance of academic standards
 - the quality of student learning opportunities
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

A check is also made on the provider's financial sustainability, management and governance (FSMG) with the aim of giving students reasonable confidence that they should not be at risk of being unable to complete their course as a result of financial failure.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#)² and explains the method for [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).³ For an explanation of terms see the glossary at the end of this report.

¹ The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code

² QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk

³ Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers): www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/higher-education-review

Key findings

Judgements

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision.

- The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and/or other awarding organisations meets UK Expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK Expectations.

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice**.

- The full and effective use of external expertise in the governance, management, quality assurance, review and assessment processes (Core practice Q2, S4; Common practice 1).
- The extensive commitment to supporting research-informed teaching through a well embedded culture of scholarly activity (Core practice Q3).
- The highly-effective strategic partnerships which are closely aligned to the College's mission and aspirations (Core practice Q8, S3).
- The comprehensive and well-targeted academic support which enables students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes (Core practice Q9).

Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations**.

By October 2023:

- provide clear and transparent information for unsuccessful applicants that includes information related to their ability to appeal an admissions decision (Core practice Q1)
- ensure that full and accurate information is provided for students on the process for making complaints, aligned with the requirements of the awarding body (Core practice Q6).

Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms** the following actions already being taken to make academic standards secure and/or improve the educational provision offered to students:

- the increasing strategic focus to ensure sufficiency of staffing and effective resource planning in response to increasing student numbers (Core practice Q3)
- the action being taken enhance student engagement, including through the General Student Council, increased communication of student engagement opportunities, and a focus on increasing module review response rates (Core practice Q5).

Financial sustainability, management and governance

The financial sustainability, management and governance check has been satisfactorily completed.

About the provider

Union Theological College, Belfast, (the College) is a small higher education institution based in Belfast which specialises in theological education. Union College was founded in 1853 and granted a Royal Charter in 1881. The College was constituted in its present form by Act of Parliament in 1978 to award a range of postgraduate degrees under the Presbyterian Theological Faculty, Ireland.

The College welcomes students from all backgrounds to study Christian theology in a community of faith and research-led scholarship, to prepare them for life, work and service in both local and global contexts. The College vision is to equip all students with a theological literacy that will enable them to flourish as individuals and contribute positively to society and culture; to train effective ministers as church leaders; and to provide a hub for learning and research.

The College offers a BA (Hons) Theology undergraduate programme in partnership with St Mary's University, Twickenham, with the first students enrolled in September 2022. The College offers postgraduate provision leading to the award of master's and doctoral degrees by the Presbyterian Theological Faculty, Ireland (PTFI) under the terms of PTFI's Royal Charter. The College is in the final stages of teach-out for the final students on provision validated by Queen's University, Belfast, which is planned to conclude in summer 2023. The College also delivers ministry training for the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) for both ministerial students and deaconesses.

The College has gone through a significant period of change and growth over the past few years with a number of new specialist academic programmes having been developed for award by the PTFI, under its Royal Charter. Recently developed programmes include PG Certificate in Biblical Greek, Master of Divinity, MTh Reformed Theology, MTh Old Testament, and MA Theology delivered in a collaborative arrangement with the BibleMesh Institute. There is a long history of delivering doctoral programmes and the College is in the process of finalising partnership agreements with the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology, Crosslands Training, and the Davenant Institute as part of a plan to further develop the College's PTFI doctoral programme

The College has seen recent changes in management and teaching staff; a new Principal was appointed in December 2020 and three new members of faculty staff were appointed in 2021. There are currently seven full-time members of faculty and one part-time, supported by a range of other recognised teachers and research associates. There are currently 110 students (45.5) enrolled at the College.

The College was subject to a full Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER(AP)) by QAA in May 2019. Following this, the College established an extensive action plan which has informed the subsequent annual monitoring process conducted by QAA. The last engagement with QAA was the annual monitoring visit of 2022 when the team concluded that the College was making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision.

Explanation of findings

This section explains the review findings in greater detail.

1 Judgement: The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards

Core practice (S1): The provider ensures that the threshold standards for its qualifications are consistent with the relevant national qualifications frameworks.

Findings

1.1 Union Theological College (the College) offers an undergraduate programme awarded through St Mary's University (SMU), Twickenham and postgraduate programmes through the Presbyterian Theological Faculty, Ireland (PTFI). The College is in the final stages of teach-out for remaining students on programmes validated by Queen's University Belfast (QUB) with the planned end of the partnership in summer 2023. In 2021, the College's Royal Charter was updated, confirming the authority to award postgraduate degrees through the PTFI which devolves authority to the College through its faculty.

1.2 The College has clear terms of reference for its key deliberative committees which oversee academic quality. These include the Teaching and Learning Panel, the Faculty Committee and the Education Committee - which has oversight of the academic standards for all qualifications awarded through PTFI. In 2022, a new memorandum of cooperation was agreed with SMU for the award of BA (Hons) Theology.

1.3 The processes and expectations set out in the relevant policies provide the opportunity to ensure that threshold standards for its qualifications are consistent with the relevant national qualifications frameworks. The design outlined allows the Core practice to be met.

1.4 The College has responded effectively to the recommendations, affirmations and good practice identified in the HER(AP) report of 2019. Actions include producing and updating the Programme Design and Review Policy through an embedded annual cycle of review and the production of a College Annual Report. Additionally, external scrutiny has taken place through successful external review by SMU as part of the due diligence for the validation of BA (Hons) Theology, and through successful revalidation reviews by the Northern Ireland Department for the Economy.

1.5 The College has clearly delineated responsibilities and autonomy in the delivery and management of assessments for provision validated through QUB and SMU. These responsibilities are explicitly stated in the responsibilities checklists. The BA (Hons) Theology, validated through SMU, makes deliberate reference to the Subject Benchmark Statement for Theology and Religious Studies. The validation process approved by SMU confirms that the programme meets the level requirements of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ).

1.6 The College has programme specifications for all its postgraduate taught awards which make appropriate reference to the Subject Benchmark Statement for Theology and Religious Studies and the FHEQ. College programme coordinators make formal links to external benchmarks in their programme reports.

1.7 The College follows the PTFI, QUB and SMU programme approval processes and produces programme specifications and definitive documents using the appropriate

awarding body templates. The College follows PTFI, QUB and SMU annual programme monitoring reporting processes and effectively gathers and analyses comments from external examiner reports, and develops appropriate action plans. For PTFI programmes, the College has developed its own Programme and Module Design and Review Policy.

1.8 External examiner reports consistently confirm that academic standards are being met at the appropriate academic levels, and the College responds effectively to issues raised by examiners. External examiners are also regularly present at examination boards. The College Quality Assurance Timetable sets out for the academic year, the key quality assurance tasks that need to be undertaken and the reporting processes for the deliberative committees.

1.9 In 2023, the College initiated an internal College Periodic Review as part of a deliberate process of self-assessment and review. The panel included a number of senior academics from the higher education sector along with a student reviewer. The subsequent report confirmed that the College is making significant progress in embedding an effective process for assuring academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience. The periodic review endorsed the development of the College's new academic committee structure with its comprehensive terms of reference. It also affirmed the revised arrangements for external examining and for responding to examiner reports. These processes reinforce actions taken following the HER(AP) 2019 review. The periodic review panel conducted meetings with members of academic and professional support staff and with students, and analysed data on student retention and achievement. It also considered external activities such as the outcomes of the validation of the BA (Hons) Theology with SMU. The College found this process of self-reflection valuable and supportive in confirming the effectiveness of the College's systems and processes.

1.10 The annual monitoring cycle reports provide further evidence of quality and standards operating effectively within the College. These are supported by positive comments from a range of external examiners. The College has in place an Annual Quality Assurance Timetable which tracks all quality assurance activity and programme reports are considered by faculty.

1.11 There are appropriate structures and processes which ensure knowledge and understanding of relevant academic standards are maintained at organisational level and disseminated to teaching staff. The effectiveness of the new committee structure and the quality assurance cycle provides evidence that the Core practice is met and the level of risk is low.

Core practice: Met
Level of risk: Low

Core practice (S2): The provider ensures that students who are awarded qualifications have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers.

Findings

1.12 The College has a set of deliberative committees, including the Teaching and Learning Panel. The Faculty Committee, chaired by the Principal, holds regular meetings during term time and at the beginning and end of each semester to approve and review modules and courses, and consider wider aspects of college life, including student wellbeing and experience. The Faculty Committee has three subcommittees which report to it: the Education Committee, the Research Committee and the Higher Education Advisory Panel. The Education Committee has oversight of the academic standards for all qualifications run through PTFI. The two awarding bodies, QUB and SMU, have overall responsibility for the awarding of credit and qualifications for programmes validated through those partnerships. Comprehensive partnership agreements are in place with QUB and SMU which demonstrate appropriate management structures, systems and processes to secure oversight of the relevant programmes.

1.13 The team considered a range of documentation, including programme specifications, reports and minutes of committee meetings, and held discussions with staff at all levels. The processes and procedures identified in college documents and programme specifications would allow the Core practice to be met.

1.14 The College Annual Evaluation Report and Enhancement Plan 2022 sets out student success data and provides key performance indicators for the College. The report identifies an overall positive retention rate of 95% across programmes accompanied by high achievement rates. Data provided through the report demonstrates that student retention is generally high and completions on most programmes are positive. The annual programme review report requires specific comment on student performance, and retention and actions taken to rectify any issues arising.

1.15 The college website, admissions procedures and clear entry requirements, programme specifications, and blogs by current students support them in making appropriate decisions and ensures they know what to expect if they enrol at the College.

1.16 The College has established a new Teaching and Learning Strategy with a clear action plan that supports the enhancement of student learning and achievement. A recently developed Externality Policy has been effective in ensuring that new programmes are designed to the standard required of awards.

1.17 Programme teams emphasise the importance of assessment design in ensuring that students achieve academic standards beyond the threshold academic levels expected of the programmes. The College Assessment Policy lays down the processes and measures to support achievement and annual programme reviews discuss aspects of improvement and enhancement. External examiners approve assessments and submit annual reports which are considered at appropriate committees.

1.18 The internal College Periodic Review, and the staff and student meetings, confirm that the College has opportunities in place for students to achieve above the threshold academic level. External examiner reports confirm this approach and students are positive about the value of feedback on their work in enabling them to achieve above the threshold level. The new Assessment Policy and College Personal Tutor system outline clear expectations and the extensive support available for students to achieve. Students commented positively on

the support they receive and the detailed assessment feedback provided on their work that enables them to improve.

1.19 External examiner reports confirm that students regularly achieve standards beyond the threshold level and consistently comment positively across the range of programme on the quality of feedback provided by staff to enable students to achieve and improve.

Core practice: Met

Level of risk: Low

Core practice (S3): Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the standards of its awards are credible and secure irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them.

Findings

1.20 The College has seen a significant period of change over the past few years with the growth of new specialist academic programmes developed for awards made by the Presbyterian Theological Faculty, Ireland (PTFI). Postgraduate provision leads to master's and doctoral degrees of the PTFI awarded under the terms of the Royal Charter. Taught master's provision is also undertaken with external partners. The first student cohort enrolled on BA (Hons) Theology - validated by St Mary's University (SMU), Twickenham - in September 2022. The College has formal signed memoranda of understanding in place with all partner institutions and all partnership agreements are formally approved by the College Management Committee. The teach-out of an undergraduate programme accredited by Queen's University, Belfast (QUB) is now in its final stages.

1.21 There are effective partnership arrangements demonstrating relevant ownership of academic standards for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, with clearly set out responsibilities for programme design, assessment design, marking and moderation. The policies and procedures in place would allow the Core practice to be met.

1.22 The College, through PTFI and the faculty, is responsible for setting and maintaining standards for all its partnerships through the College Partnership Policy overseen by both the Management Committee and Faculty, and adhering to seven guiding principles.

1.23 Following the decision by QUB to terminate the validation protocol, the College undertook a period of reflection on the development of a future strategic partnership for the delivery of an undergraduate theology programme. The priority for the College following this period was to partner with an institution that aligned with its mission in terms of welcoming students from all backgrounds to study Christian theology in a community of faith. The aim was to focus on research-led scholarship to prepare students for life, work and service in both local and global contexts.

1.24 After two years of development, the College announced a partnership with the Catholic faith-based SMU for the delivery of BA Theology, enrolling the first intake in September 2022. This vision for strategic partnerships aligns closely with the College's mission. This approach was warmly supported by the College Periodic Review panel which commented positively on the future vision for higher education.

1.25 In addition to the development of the PTFI PhD provision, the College has also entered into several strategic partnerships with a view to consolidating and developing the College's long standing doctoral programme, formerly validated through QUB.

1.26 Similar care was taken with the development of the partnerships for provision in the delivery of PhD programmes with the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology, Cambridge; the Davenant Institute; and Crosslands Training. The strategic focus has been on aligning partnerships with research and staff expertise in the College. These developments have also been informed and reviewed using the principles stated in the Learning and Teaching Strategy.

1.27 The main partnership the College has in place for taught master's programmes is with the BibleMesh Institute. The external examiner for the master's programmes confirms that standards are credible and secure. The panel had meetings with staff and students from the BibleMesh Institute confirming that the College appoints teaching staff who are suitably qualified, inducted and mentored, and students state that they are guided appropriately on how to achieve the awards. The review team consider the highly-effective strategic partnerships which are closely aligned to the College's mission and aspirations to be **good** practice. This matter is also addressed under Core practice Q8.

Core practice: Met

Level of risk: Low

Core practice (S4): The provider uses external expertise, assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent.

Findings

1.28 Following the recommendation of the HER(AP) review of 2019, the College focused on developing a clear set of terms of reference and schedule of meetings for all its deliberative committees in a remodelled academic governance structure. A Higher Education Advisory Panel (HEAP) has also been established. In response to the comments raised in the last QAA annual monitoring visit, two of the new committees (the Quality Action Panel and the Academic and Student Affairs Panel) were combined to form a new Education Committee in 2022. College policies and procedures have been revised in accordance with the new committee structure and published on the website.

1.29 The processes and procedures put in place by the College would allow the Core practice to be met. The team considered both external and internal documentation, including documentation of awarding bodies, and held meetings with staff, and undergraduate and postgraduate students.

1.30 The recently developed HEAP provides advice and guidance to the College on all matters relating to academic standards and quality assurance. The College Strategic Enhancement Plan 2022-23 sets out in its guiding principles, that it will work with external academic experts to achieve its aims and identifies a range of external agencies with whom it will work. Additionally, the College recently commissioned its own internal College Periodic Review, utilising academic and theological expertise to review the full range of provision and make recommendations for improvement and enhancement.

1.31 The College has in place an effective Externality Policy which operates to support the design, development and review of programmes and supports the appointment of external examiners and the work of the Higher Education Advisory Panel (HEAP). The policy sets out in detail the external expertise governance arrangements and reporting lines, appointment and induction of external examiners and HEAP, and its relationship with the Learning and Teaching Panel. The College uses an effective range of external expertise in the development of programmes, including the master's and PhD programmes. The review team considers the full and effective use of external expertise in the governance, management, quality assurance, review and assessment processes to be **good practice**.

1.32 The College Assessment Policy 2022-23 sets out all aspects of the processes and procedures for assessment, marking, moderation and feedback. The policy has been specifically aligned to the FHEQ, Quality Code, Assessment Guidance and the Theology and Religious Studies Subject Benchmark Statement. This policy takes account of the differing requirements of the PTFI programmes and SMU programmes in relation to the operation of Board of Examiners. The College has a set of academic regulations for postgraduate and undergraduate programmes that clearly set out the classification processes for all awards.

1.33 The College's internal moderation process consists of first and second marking. There are regular reviews of assessment processes to support and improve student outcomes. Students appreciate the formal and informal feedback provided by staff regarding their assessment performance. Undergraduate and postgraduate handbooks include information on assessment schedules, marking criteria, academic integrity, the procedures for the submission of assessments and a statement on anonymous marking, and the use of plagiarism-detection software.

1.34 The College has effective guidance in place for conduct of examinations and examining procedures along with an Academic Integrity Policy and a Recognition of Prior

Learning Policy. The College programme specification has a Programme Level Assessment Strategy and teaching and learning activities are operating effectively. External examiner roles are clear in ensuring assessment and classification processes are reliable, fair and transparent. External examiners approve all assessments and review a representative sample of all work completed in an academic year for undergraduate programmes. For postgraduate awards, the external examiner reviews all assessments.

1.35 The review team concludes that there is good practice in the use of external expertise, that assessment and classification processes are reliable, fair and transparent. The Core practice is met and the level of risk is low.

Core practice: Met

Level of risk: Low

Common practice (Standards 1): The provider reviews its Core practices for standards regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement.

Findings

1.36 The College's effective response to the recommendations of the HER(AP) review of 2019 enabled the development of a more systematic approach to the design and review of quality assurance, review and enhancement structures and policies. The College also developed an explicit process for mapping its activity and policies to the Expectations of the revised Quality Code. The establishment of a new academic committee structure with explicit terms of reference, constitution and membership, and a system for the review of policies by the Quality Assurance Panel supports the opportunity to review Core practices.

1.37 The structures and procedures in place would allow the Core practice to be met. The review team considered a wide range of documentation including review reports, and held detailed discussions with students and staff at all levels.

1.38 The recent period of transition and development has provided a significant number of opportunities for the College to review its Core practices for academic standards. The College has a systematic approach to the review of policies that impacts on academic quality and enhancement through the Policy Spreadsheet. This outlines the key dates for the review of policies and procedures by faculty, and a Quality Assurance Timetable with all the key quality activity for the academic year. The College monitors the programme review process through the Education Committee which has replaced the Quality Assurance Panel.

1.39 The new approaches provide an effective approach to the systematic review of quality and standards which is supported by the revised academic committee and governance structures. Terms of Reference for all the committees are appropriate and reporting lines for issues raised at programme and college level are effective in practice.

1.40 The review team concludes that the College reviews its Core practices for standards regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement. Therefore, the Common practice is met and the level of risk is low.

Common practice: Met
Level of risk: Low

The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards: Summary of findings

1.41 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

1.42 All four of the Core and Common practices for this judgement area are met and the associated level of risk is low in all areas. There is good practice in the development of highly effective strategic partnerships, and the full and effective use of external expertise in the governance, management, quality assurance, review and assessment processes. There are no recommendations or affirmations in this area.

1.43 The review team concludes that the setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and under its own Royal Charter and other awarding organisations at the provider **meets** UK expectations.

2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities

Core practice (Q1): The provider has a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system.

Findings

2.1 The College provides information to potential applicants through the recently rebranded website, open days and external fairs. Events are supported by current students and alumni, as well as attracting ministerial students through the relationship with PTFI. The Admissions Protocol confirms that undergraduate students apply directly to the College through the website. Postgraduate taught (PGT) students apply through the online platform provided by BibleMesh. Postgraduate research (PGR) students talk directly with an appropriate member of faculty. For postgraduate applicants, the application process includes a sample of work alongside the personal and qualification information and references. All applications are considered by the Admissions Panel and applicants are provided with a written conditional or unconditional offer or told that they have been unsuccessful. The College intends to move PGT applications, which currently arrive through BibleMesh, to the College.

2.2 The processes and expectations set out in the relevant policies provide the opportunity for a fair, reliable and inclusive admissions process with clear information provided to students in relation to their application and the decision-making process. The review team tested this through consideration of the college website, and information provided to successful and unsuccessful applicants, and comments in the Student Submission. The team held meetings with students on campus virtually, and with senior staff and teaching and support staff. The design outlined allows the Core practice to be met.

2.3 The Admission Policy for PTFI 2023 states that faculty has overall responsibility for admissions with an Admissions Panel responsible for implementation and review. The policy is robust and detailed, providing a clear overview of expectations for pre-application information, the application process, selection and communication of decisions, including expected timeframes. The undergraduate Admission Policy provides similar comprehensive information. Both policies outline the applicant's ability to appeal an admissions decision, with the three stages and a clear timeline outlined although this information is not given in the letter to unsuccessful applicants. The Code of Practice for Research Degree Programme (PhD) also includes admissions information. The Policies and Procedures Overview outlines the policy review cycle, identifying a three-yearly cycle for admissions policies.

2.4 The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Policy encompasses both certificated experiential approaches with applications approved by the Admissions Panel. The policy clearly outlines credit ratings, acceptable circumstances for RPL and the process, including the requirement of the applicant to complete an RPL Application Form and provide a portfolio showing how previous certification meets the learning outcomes of the relevant modules. Applicants will be invited to an interview and expected to complete a critical review. A similar process outlined for experiential learning, with varying requirements and an expectation that the applicant will discuss their intended claim with appropriate academic staff.

2.5 The college website describes open days, provides programme information - including programme specifications, module information and entry requirements - and contains an admissions section outlining how to apply that is both useful and informative. It includes information for international students, information related to funding and finance, and

informative FAQs. The Student Hub section includes links to relevant policies and procedures, information on student support, accommodation and student voice, and student testimonials. Testimonials are also used as marketing materials and during open events. The website updating protocol outlines the processes for changing information and the website provides clear information for applicants.

2.6 Students are positive about the application process as highlighted in the Student Submission. Survey responses to questions around application, the website, and the information applicants are provided in relation to their programme are positive. Students noted the ease of the application process and the effective communications, and postgraduate students stated the requirement for a sample of work as part of the application process. The Student Submission and meetings with students were also positive about the information received during induction.

2.7 As part of its aim to ensure an inclusive learning environment, the College does not require a statement of faith for entry. This approach is further supported by the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy which encourages inclusive access and admissions.

2.8 The Admissions Panel is effective and staff spoke confidently about the application process. The information provided to successful candidates included an example of both conditional and unconditional offers. It clearly outlines the offer and the next steps. However, the letter to unsuccessful applicants is brief and does not outline a reason for the decision made, nor mention the opportunity to appeal. Senior staff stated that those who requested additional information would be provided with a rationale for the decision and be made aware of their right to appeal. The review team **recommends** that, by October 2023, UTC provides clear and transparent information for unsuccessful applicants that includes information related to their right to appeal an admissions decision.

2.9 Potential students are provided with sufficient information to make informed choices prior to application. Students are positive about the application and admissions process, noting ease of navigation and effective communication. The information for those who are unsuccessful should be enhanced to ensure applicants are aware of their opportunity to appeal an admissions decision. Overall, the College has a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system, the Core practice is met and any associated risk is low.

Core practice: Met

Level of risk: Low

Core practice (Q2): The provider designs and/or delivers high-quality courses.

Findings

2.10 The College has primary responsibility for the design of all programmes. The recently developed Programme Design and Review Policy ensures that the process for approval and adjustments to PTFI programmes is applied consistently. The policy outlines the processes for programme and module approval, design, review and withdrawal. The Faculty Committee oversees course design and approves programmes with PTFI awards. For the BA (Hons) Theology, the awarding body is SMU and the College has responsibility for programme delivery. The College is required to collaborate with SMU on the design and any adjustments to the undergraduate programme in a process that complies with university programme regulations and procedures.

2.11 The review team examined processes and procedures relating to course design and the annual review, held meetings with a range of staff and students, and examined programme information and minutes of meetings. The processes and procedures put in place by the College for the delivery of high-quality courses would allow the Core practice to be met.

2.12 The processes and procedures developed following the HER(AP) 2019 review are effective in leading to high-quality programme design, with high levels of student satisfaction. In response to the previous full review, the College has significantly increased the extent of externality in the process of course design, formalised in an Externality Policy. The College now receives specialist advice through the introduction of a Higher Education Advisory Panel (HEAP). HEAP is comprised of independent experts with relevant professional experience and provides scrutiny of new programme design. HEAP was used in the recently designed BA (Hons) Theology which underwent external validation with SMU. In addition to HEAP, the College consulted with students as required by the validating partner and collaborated closely with SMU throughout the process.

2.13 The College has implemented a Learning and Teaching Strategy for taught programmes with the purpose of enhancing the quality of delivery. The strategy has a duration of five years, is available openly on the website and links to the College's Strategic Enhancement Plan. In realising its strategy, the College is promoting research-informed learning opportunities and highlighting the research interests of faculty members. The College is additionally promoting the relationship between theology and science, delivering a course in Science for Seminaries and providing students with the opportunity to attend a conference in the field of bioethics.

2.14 The review team investigated arrangements with BibleMesh to evaluate the quality of the online MA course in Theology and concluded that the course is of high quality with arrangements for delivery clearly laid out and functioning well. The College remains in control of quality and standards by providing the programme design, assessment structure and by approving teaching staff. The College is also responsive to requests for course changes from BibleMesh students. Following feedback from modular evaluations and discussions with external examiners, the College reduced the number of essays, for the purpose of increasing their length and depth. The students from BibleMesh that the review team met, were highly complimentary about their online learning experience.

2.15 In response to outcomes at the previous full QAA review, the College is establishing robust processes for the monitoring and review of programmes. Each Programme Coordinator prepares an Annual Review that is considered at an Annual Programme Review meeting in the summer term. The review takes account of feedback from multiple sources including tutors, external examiners and the student cohort. Student feedback is received

through standard reporting templates for modules and programmes and student representation at the review meetings. Despite some inconsistency in the depth of the resulting programme reports, the majority provide a thorough reflection to drive future enhancements. The internal recommendations arising from these processes are referred to the Education Committee for approval. The programme reports are subsequently used by the Principal to compile the College's Annual Report. The resulting Annual College Report and Enhancement Plan is ratified by faculty and is publicly available on the college website. While still being embedded, these processes are functioning effectively and leading to programme enhancements.

2.16 In addition to annual programme reviews, periodic reviews are required every three years as outlined in the Periodic Review Procedures. The review requires a visit by a review panel to consider written and oral evidence. The outcome is subsequently submitted to the Management Committee for reflection. In spring 2023, an internal Periodic Review was completed and the draft report shows the process to be thorough and supportive to the needs of the College. Significant progress has been made following the HER(AP) 2019 review with strengthening processes to review and enhance its higher education provision.

2.17 The College has made significant improvements since the previous full QAA review and is embedding effective processes for the delivery of high-quality courses. External expertise is used widely and effectively, and is identified as an area of **good practice** under Standards Core practice S4 where the effective use of external expertise in the governance, management, quality assurance, review and assessment processes is addressed. The Core practice is met and the level of risk is low.

Core practice: Met
Level of risk: Low

Core practice (Q3): The provider has sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience.

Findings

2.18 The College sets out a commitment to providing research-informed teaching in its Student Charter. Staff are recruited and appointed based on planned staffing needs identified through programme development and annual programme review, and staff are inducted into the provider in line with the Induction Handbook, ensuring essential training is undertaken and staff are introduced to key policies and procedures, as well as to key members of staff. For the SMU programme, the College collaborates on staffing, and arrangements are set out in the responsibilities checklist. Where PTFI programmes are delivered in partnership, the College considers staff curricula vitae (CV) and approves recognised teachers and research associates as set out in the Code of Practice for Research Degree Programme (PhD).

2.19 The review team tested the Core practice through an analysis of staff CVs, documentation on annual staff reviews, validation documentation, committee minutes, training and professional development opportunities, and meetings with the senior team, students and teaching staff. The team also considered scholarly activity and research outputs. Processes in place allow the Core practice to be met.

2.20 For the BA (Hons) Theology, the requirements are for the College to submit a full list of staff CVs for approval by SMU. For programmes delivered in partnership, there is a record of all recognised teachers and research associates showing where teachers have submitted CVs and been approved by faculty as set out in the Code of Practice for Research Degree Programme (PhD).

2.21 The annual programme review process prompts programme coordinators to consider resource needs within the template provided. This process is utilised effectively to identify staffing needs. However, the review also highlights high staff turnover in 2021, which had the potential to impact on the student experience especially within the dissertation module, and demonstrates an awareness that staffing requirements may take time to resolve. Faculty and the Management Committee are responsible for the recruitment, selection and appointment of staff, with Heads of Department ensuring that unexpected staffing issues are addressed immediately, potentially through partnership staff who are recognised teachers. Students spoke positively of staff and commented that where there had been unexpected staff absence through illness, this had been seamlessly and effectively addressed.

2.22 A Faculty Committee review of staffing took place in May 2021, aligned to the Teaching and Learning Strategy, and a process is currently being undertaken by the Management Committee to look at staff planning for the next academic year. This takes into account wider staff workloads, the range of provision and responsibilities. The review team **affirms** the increasing strategic focus to ensure sufficiency of staffing and effective resource planning in response to increasing student numbers.

2.23 The staff information demonstrates high levels of experience, qualification and research, including for professional support staff such as the librarian. Job descriptions clearly outline the roles and responsibilities and ensure alignment with specialist academic requirements. Once appointed, staff have a formal induction programme as set out in the Induction Handbook. The Handbook contains robust information inducting new staff members into the College. It outlines the history, mission and vision, the management structure, and information about the programmes offered and college life. The Handbook also introduces personnel policies and procedures. The Teaching and Learning Strategy is included as is an induction checklist to be completed by the line manager and the new staff

member to ensure they have had access to relevant information, an introduction to key policies and procedures, introductions to key members of staff, and that they have completed essential training expectations. Staff confirm that their recruitment and induction processes have been thorough and included appropriate training and support, with some staff being supported for internal progression by 'acting up'.

2.24 The College has various mechanisms in place to support ongoing staff development and a culture of scholarly activity, including sabbatical leave, development grants, peer review, annual appraisal and access to support and resources through QAA Membership and relevant partnerships. There is currently no overarching document outlining the support available; however, the College is in the process of developing a draft Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Policy.

2.25 Staff wanting to take sabbatical leave are expected to submit an application that is considered by faculty, proposed to the Teaching and Learning Panel, and commended to the Management Committee for approval. The application outlines the purpose of the sabbatical leave and the proposed outputs, and, on completion of the leave, staff submit a report against the expectations outlined. The Personal Development Fund (PDF), outlined in the faculty guide, can be used to support sabbatical leave and other expenses directly related to an individual's academic development, such as conference attendance. Unused allocations can be rolled over into the following academic year. Staff spoke positively about the range of opportunities provided to support research and scholarly activity.

2.26 The College undertakes a peer review process approved by the Faculty Committee and Education Committee and an annual appraisal process. The peer review schedule outlines the people reviewed, by whom and the date the report is received. The peer review form identifies good practice and areas for improvement related to teaching methods, curriculum content, delivery and strategies to engage the full range of students' abilities. The feedback provides a useful supportive mechanism and staff confirmed that the process is helpful in aiding professional development.

2.27 The annual appraisal process was last undertaken formally in 2020 owing to several staffing changes and the use of probationary review for new staff. However, appraisals are scheduled for this academic year and a revised annual appraisal process is under development. Appraisals include questions about teaching responsibilities, enhancements, research and how this has supported teaching, training and conferences attended and any other external activities undertaken. Staff goals are identified for the next academic year and completed examples include effective and appropriate reflection. The new staff probationary review process identifies ratings against appropriate criteria and an overview of areas for improvement.

2.28 The Strategic Enhancement Plan demonstrates a clear strategic commitment to staff development, research and scholarly activity. The plan identifies development of a formal CPD Policy as a key action, alongside activities to enhance a research-active community including through the annual college conference, supporting partnerships and networks, faculty publication, the development grant and the peer review process. The College recently held an international Luther Conference.

2.29 Higher Education Academy (HEA) fellowship is actively encouraged, and an external adviser has been engaged to support this process. There is a commitment to developing staff understanding of quality assurance in higher education through access to resources available through QAA Membership. Some new staff previously undertook the PG Cert HE through QUB, but this is no longer available to UTC. Instead, new staff are now facilitated in making direct application to Advance HE for fellowship status.

2.30 The Faculty Publications, Conference and CPD document outlines research outputs

and activity by six members of faculty, showcasing a variety of publications, conferences and professional development, and highlighting research-active staff. Staff shared various examples of their own scholarly activity and showed how this informs their teaching and commented positively on the wide range of development activities and research opportunities available. Students value the qualification, skill and expertise shown by their tutors, commenting favourably on the staff being research active and influential academics in their field. This is further supported by high student satisfaction with staff in the Annual Student Survey and is noted in the Student Submission. The review team consider the extensive commitment to supporting research-informed teaching through a well-embedded culture of scholarly activity is **good practice**.

2.31 Staff are appropriately qualified and committed to delivering a high-quality academic experience. The College is taking a strategic approach to ensure staffing sufficiency and resource planning in a period of growth. A wide range of CPD opportunities are available for staff development and there is extensive commitment to supporting research-informed teaching. The College has sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience. The Core practice is met and the level of risk is low.

Core practice: Met

Level of risk: Low

Core practice (Q4): The provider has sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience.

Findings

2.32 The Learning and Teaching Strategy demonstrates a clear commitment to creating a learning environment that enables students to flourish. The College delivers teaching in a purpose-built environment including the well regarded Gamble Library. The College reviews its provision of learning resources through an annual review cycle that requires support areas, including the library, to report on their activities and effectiveness. The review process provides the opportunity for tutors to request further resources to enhance provision. Students provide input on learning resources through surveys and the Library Users' Forum. Individual resource requests are processed by the librarian.

2.33 The team tested the Core practice through consideration of a range of internal and external reports, student feedback, and through access to the virtual learning environment (VLE). Additionally, the review team held meetings with the senior team, teaching and support staff and students. The processes in place allow the Core practice to be met.

2.34 The College provides facilities and a wide range of targeted resources appropriate for theological education. There is an effective process for the ongoing review of resources. The Gamble Library holds a range of theological books and periodicals with a collection that continues to be updated. In addition, a range of digital resources is available to students through OpenAthens and Jisc Affiliate membership. The College has its own VLE to support the delivery of taught and research-based programmes. Study skills materials, handbooks and programme documentation are accessible through the VLE which also hosts a wide range of video content.

2.35 Students are positive about the suitability and availability of resources, and emphasised the College's commitment to ensuring that they receive the required resources to achieve. Students confirmed that they provide feedback on the suitability of learning resources through module and programme-level surveys, and through student representatives at the Library Users' Forum. Students highlighted the willingness of the College and librarian, in particular, to support them with being able to access specific resources, particularly relevant to postgraduate students.

2.36 Student professional services are sufficient and support a high-quality academic provision. Personal tutoring is provided both formally and informally and is highly effective in supporting students' learning needs. Through its formal structures, the College ensures that all students receive an appropriate level of support, as required in the Student Charter. All students are required to attend a minimum of one tutorial per semester. Where delivery is online, BibleMesh Institute students receive two tutorials per semester. In addition, students have the opportunity to engage with tutors informally, such as through coffee meetings. Both on campus and online students emphasised that their personal tutors were approachable and supportive.

2.37 There is a wide range of appropriate resources and a high-level of personal and pastoral support for students, including through a range of effective welfare services. Undergraduate students have access to counselling and wellbeing services through Inspire Student Wellbeing counselling services. Welfare services relating to ministerial students are delivered through the Institute of Ministry and through an on-campus Presbyterian Chaplaincy Team. The College nominates a disability officer who is required to ensure equality of opportunity. The Student Disability Policy has recently been updated with the College investing in facilities that ensure access for students with disability.

2.38 The College provides sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience. The Core practice is met and the level of risk is low.

Core practice: Met

Level of risk: Low

Core practice (Q5): The provider actively engages students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience.

Findings

2.39 The Student Charter sets out the key responsibilities of both the College and students for student engagement. Student participation in the management of programmes is encouraged with an expectation that students will engage in student representative systems and evaluate the student experience with the aim of improving the quality of teaching and learning. The College has recently undertaken a Making Your Voice Heard campaign as a new approach to encouraging and supporting student engagement.

2.40 Student engagement mechanisms include opportunities for individual student feedback through module reviews and tutor feedback forms, the annual student survey, and through engagement in periodic reviews and focus groups. Students are also engaged collectively through student representative engagement in committees and through quality assurance activity such as membership of the Teaching and Learning Panel, the Education Committee and the new General Student Council. In addition, the Ministerial students have a collective voice through the Ministerial Students' Council (MSC).

2.41 The review team examined documentation linked to how the College engages with students, and held meetings with staff and students to confirm their understanding of how they are engaged, both individually and collectively. The processes and procedures in place would allow the Core practice to be met.

2.42 Students are well engaged in the quality of their educational experience, collectively through the student representative system. The terms of reference confirm that students are represented on various committees through the President of the Student Council's (Ministerial Student Council) membership on the Teaching and Learning Panel, three undergraduate and postgraduate student representatives on the Education Committee (EC), and a representative on HEAP and the library users forum. The General Student Council has responsibility for the organising of social events and volunteering opportunities, engaging in the student representative system, and reporting to the EC. Membership includes two students per programme year and a faculty liaison member.

2.43 Recent agenda items at the Student Council include approval of the Student Charter, consideration of the QAA review visit and discussion around upcoming agenda items. There is evidence of discussion related to student surveys, funding for social events and student engagement in open events, as well as receiving information from the EC around artificial intelligence and academic integrity. The minutes show active discussion and suggestions from students, including the extension of the library hours; matters raised by students are acted upon swiftly. Discussion with students and the Student Submission confirm that students valued the introduction of the General Student Council and the impact already made by this body, and see action being taken as a result.

2.44 Student representatives are recruited through email and VLE communication from staff and are invited to put themselves forward prior to election. In relation to training and support, the Ministerial Council ensures a handover of its presidency and the General Student Council, currently in its first year of activity, intends to adopt this practice. Support is by the faculty liaison member and a member of administration who attended the first council meeting and provided an example of minutes, agenda and reporting processes. Students confirm that they are supported informally with their role and through the specific support for the General Student Council members, although the Student Submission stated that further training may have been beneficial. Overall, students feel that they are well represented on a number of formal deliberative bodies, that they are given significant opportunities to

contribute their views and agree that their views are heard and can bring about change.

2.45 Mechanisms to provide the opportunity for individual student engagement include Module Review and tutor evaluation and surveys, including the National Student Survey (NSS) - the annual student survey. The Module Evaluation Template provides the opportunity for students to provide open comments and grading for course organisation, the level of challenge, resources, assessment information. It allows feedback on the overall quality of the module, areas of good practice and areas for further development. The Tutor Evaluation Template provides the opportunity for students to rate and comment on the teaching and learning experience. The response rates range considerably between programme with an average response of 38%. The College acknowledges the low response rates for module review and action to increase engagement is currently underway, with an intention to complete module reviews during session times and through the Making Your Voice Heard campaign.

2.46 The Annual Student Survey was reintroduced in 2022, having not taken place since 2018-19. The results and response rates are evidenced in the Quality Action Panel and Academic and Student Affairs Panel, with positive discussion and some consideration of actions that might lead to improvement. There is also a targeted survey for the PhD students, with outcomes noted in the Annual Review of the Research Degree Programme. The students also stated that they had been asked to complete targeted surveys for the recent internal periodic review and where particular issues were raised. These surveys represent opportunities for students to engage and provide individual feedback, although the College acknowledges that low response rates limit the effectiveness of the process.

2.47 The Programme and Module Design and Review process notes that students are present at the module and programme review meetings. The use of student feedback in annual review reporting is variable, with some reports simply noting student satisfaction with the programme and others providing more detailed responses. However, the minutes from the Faculty Committee meeting that focused on module and programme review include detailed student comments related to modules and the overall programme.

2.48 Students are informed about the opportunities available to them to engage in the quality of their educational experience through the Student Feedback Poster as part of the Make Your Voice Heard campaign which is available around campus and on the VLE. Student representative names are also available on posters and on the VLE. In addition, there is a short section in the Undergraduate Handbook, the College Users Handbook, and the example MTh Programme Handbook which explains the different survey opportunities and notes that student representatives sit on various committees. The college website also has a Student Support and Student Voice section which provides some basic information, although this may require updating with recent enhancements.

2.49 Students confirm that they were aware of, and value the opportunities available to them and that they had access to relevant student representatives for their programmes. Students also state that the formal mechanisms are further supported by the many informal opportunities available to engage through coffee events and regular engagement with tutors which are highly effective in ensuring their voice is heard. Staff and students were able to articulate a number of actions as a result of student engagement, including changes to assessment weightings and essay wordcounts, and the facilities review. These matters all resulted from feedback through the Annual Survey and are actioned in the Strategic Enhancement Plan. Students are made aware of changes as a result of their engagement through subsequent meetings, module review dissemination and informal mechanisms. The Annual College Report and Enhancement Plans also include information on student feedback in the What We Have Learnt section which notes the results and actions and ensures the closing of the feedback loop.

2.50 While there are clear mechanisms and opportunities available for students to engage with the quality of their educational experience, some of these are newly reinvigorated, including the Annual Student Survey, and newly-introduced General Student Council. Other mechanisms are under consideration for further development, such as module review response rates supported by the Make Your Voice Heard campaign. The review team **affirms** the action being taken to further develop and enhance student engagement, including through the General Student Council, increased communication of student engagement opportunities and a focus on increasing module review response rates.

2.51 There are clear opportunities available to students to engage in the quality of their educational experience individually and collectively. The opportunities available have been recently reinvigorated and the review team affirms the action being taken by the College to further develop and enhance the student engagement mechanisms. The Core practice is therefore met, and the level of risk is low.

Core practice: Met
Level of risk: Low

Core practice (Q6): The provider has fair and transparent procedures for handling complaints and appeals which are accessible to all students.

Findings

2.52 The Student Charter sets out a commitment to maintaining an open and accessible complaints process. Students studying on the PTFI programmes and those studying on the undergraduate programme can complain utilising the Student Complaints Procedure. Where undergraduate students remain dissatisfied, they have the opportunity to further the complaint to SMU as the awarding body.

2.53 For students wanting to appeal an academic decision, the Postgraduate Research Programme Academic Appeals Policy is provided for PTFI students. SMU undergraduate students initially utilise the College's Undergraduate Academic Appeals Procedure, with the ability to progress to SMU processes if required.

2.54 The validation agreement with QUB states that both complaints and appeals are the responsibility of the College. However, the responsibilities checklist notes that for the remaining students on the teach-out programme, both complaints and appeals are the responsibility of the awarding partner and students are expected to follow the University General Regulations.

2.55 The team tested the Core practice by examining the complaints and appeals procedures for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, reviewing the student handbooks, responsibilities checklists and holding meetings with the senior managers, staff and students. The design allows the Core practice to be met as there are relevant and appropriate procedures in place for all students.

2.56 The Student Complaints Procedure is robust and informative. The procedure provides definitions highlighting the difference between feedback, concerns and complaints. Complaints are defined as an expression of dissatisfaction about the standard of service, or lack of action by the College. The two-stage approach is clearly outlined, with explanations around what is required and who will be involved at each stage, and with appropriate timelines. However, the policy document explicitly states that there is no ability to appeal a complaints decision. This does not align with the information provided in the SMU and college responsibilities checklist, or with the information provided by the awarding partner representative in the meeting with senior staff. There have not been any student complaints to date and therefore no students have been adversely affected by this, and all other elements within the procedure are appropriate. The review team **recommends** that, by October 2023, the College ensures that full and accurate information is provided for students on the process for making complaints, aligned with the requirements of the awarding body.

2.57 For academic appeals, the Undergraduate Academic Appeals Procedures clearly and transparently outline the grounds for appeal and the steps of the procedure. Clear and fair timescales are provided, and students are informed of their right to review an outcome, including the opportunity to progress to SMU if they remain dissatisfied. The procedure outlined is appropriate, fair and transparent. The Postgraduate Research Programme Academic Appeals Policy also clearly notes the grounds of appeal and outlines the process, which includes submitting an appeal to the Head of Academic Administration, who then forwards it to the Head of Department for response, before progression to the College Research Appeals Committee (CRAC) for consideration. The timescales are fair and transparent. The CRAC decision is final and there is no procedure to appeal academic judgement.

2.58 For QUB and the final teach-out arrangements, the policies and procedures available

are set out in the University General Regulations, where both the complaints and appeals procedures are clearly outlined and supported with effective student guidance.

2.59 Students are directed to the relevant procedures on the website in the Users Handbook, the Undergraduate Programme Handbook 2022-23 and in programme handbooks, and the VLE and website. In addition, the Undergraduate Academic Appeals Policy is mentioned in the UG Study Regulations and the Academic Appeals Research Degree Procedure is referenced in the Code of Practice for Research Degree Programme (PhD). The college website provides assurance that the Student Complaints Procedure and the postgraduate appeals procedures are available and accessible, although the undergraduate appeals procedure has not yet been added. Students confirmed that they knew how to access the relevant policies and procedures and are confident in asking for support. Professional support staff confirmed they are aware of the policies and could signpost and support effectively, and accessibility is further confirmed in the responses in the Annual College Survey. Senior staff confirmed that there have been no complaints or appeals but stated that any matters raised would be noted in the annual report as part of the quality cycle.

2.60 The College has clear procedures available for student complaints and academic appeals that are fair and transparent. These are signposted in relevant handbooks and available on the website, and students confirm accessibility. The Student Complaints Procedure does not fully align with the awarding partner expectations in relation to appealing a complaints decision, and the review team **recommends** that the College ensures that full and accurate information is provided for students on the process for making complaints. This matter relates to a small element of the procedure and has not impacted on any students to date; therefore the Core practice is met and the level of risk is low.

Core practice: Met
Level of risk: Low

Core practice (Q7): Where the provider offers research degrees, it delivers these in appropriate and supportive research environments.

Findings

2.61 The Teaching and Learning Strategy and Student Charter demonstrate the College's commitment to providing a high-quality and research-informed learning community. To achieve this in 2020, the College established the PTFI PhD Programme, replacing existing doctoral arrangements with QUB with awards made under the Royal Charter. At the time of the review, the College had six PhD students including one remaining student under QUB arrangements (supervised by the College) and three PTFI PhD students supervised in a new partnership with the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology in Cambridge (KLC). Partnerships agreements have also been signed with Crossland Training and the Davenant Institute. These new partnerships enable the College, as a small institution, to expand capacity for specialist supervision of doctoral students.

2.62 Policies and processes that relate to the PhD Programme are outlined in the College's extensive Code of Practice (CoP) which has been developed to align with the Quality Code and the FHEQ. The CoP outlines admissions procedures, assessment criteria for the award of PhD and the complaints and appeals process. The CoP also provides details on the process for selecting a supervisory team. The selection of an appropriate supervisory team is the responsibility of the College's Research Committee. A range of research backgrounds is expected to be represented across the team and while responsibilities are shared, the principal supervisor has overall responsibility.

2.63 The review team examined documentation demonstrating how the College delivers the PhD programme and whether arrangements ensure an appropriate and supportive research environment to meet the expectations of the Qualification Characteristics Statement for doctoral degrees. The review team held meetings with relevant staff and students to confirm their understanding. The processes and procedures in place would allow the Core practice to be met.

2.64 Supervisors from the partner institutions are required to become familiar with the expectations of their role and QAA's Qualification Characteristics Statement for doctoral degrees and the Advice on Doctoral Standards for Research Students and Supervisors. Although a training programme has been delivered to partner institution supervisors, the College has identified a need for future supervisors to be further developed to ensure that all arrangements are robustly understood. Current arrangements for PhD students nevertheless provide a supportive environment with a broad range of resources for the small number of candidates conducting research. PhD students receive regular meetings with supervisors which result in reports being produced, considered and recorded by the administrative team. The PhD student survey highlighted broad satisfaction with supervisory arrangements and resources available. This positive comment was mirrored by the PhD student representative who met with the review team. The student confirmed that supervisors set regular formal meetings and are readily accessible outside meetings, believing the supervisors to be supportive and detailed in their academic feedback. If problems on students' progress are identified, the expectation is for the supervisor from the partner institution to notify the College's PhD Coordinator and the Research Committee. At the time of the review, no problems had been identified.

2.65 The College has a range of resources available for research, with the long established and well regarded Gamble Library containing specialist books and journals, including digital resources. A policy is in place on how the library is to support distance-learning PhD students and support is available to cover the cost of posting books within the UK. The student representative considered resources to be good and felt supported by the librarian in

identifying suitable sources. Materials to support students with research skills are accessible on the VLE. The College is effective in promoting a research environment. PhD students are encouraged to attend departmental seminars and conferences as well as to present papers. Travel grants are available to support their attendance. The College additionally encourages faculty staff to publish with the goal of creating a research-active community that contributes to the study of Theology. This matter is also addressed as **good practice** under Core practice Q3.

2.66 The College provides formal channels through which to hear and respond to issues raised by PhD students; as well as the PhD student survey, a representative PhD student sits on the Education Committee. The PhD Programme Coordinator addresses concerns through the Research Committee and generates an annual review of the programme which identifies matters raised by students. Current arrangements provide an appropriate and supportive research environment. The Core practice is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Core practice: Met

Level of risk: Low

Core practice (Q8): Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the academic experience is high-quality irrespective of where or how courses are delivered and who delivers them.

Findings

2.67 The College has a long historical collaboration with Queen's University Belfast (QUB). QUB acted as the awarding body for an undergraduate degree in Theology and for a PhD programme. These arrangements are coming to an end and, at the time of the review, only one undergraduate and one PhD student remained on these programmes. An addendum to the memorandum of agreement (MOA) with QUB has been signed and a teach-out plan clarifies arrangements which are likely to conclude in summer 2023.

2.68 In response to the termination of the partnership with QUB, the College has been developing a range of alternative collaborative arrangements based on robust partnership principles and procedures. Recent partnership agreements and responsibility checklists outline the College's responsibilities. These agreements vary and for the BA (Hons) Theology degree, SMU is the awarding body. As the delivery institution, the College is required to comply with SMU programme regulations and procedures. In contrast, the online MA in Theology is delivered by the BibleMesh Institute with PTFI as the awarding body. Similarly, in 2022, the College entered partnerships with three institutions to collaborate on a PhD programme in which PTFI is the awarding body under the Royal Charter. The partner institutions are the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology, Crosslands Training and the Davenant Institute.

2.69 The team explored how these partnership relationships work in practice and fit the College's ethos by holding a range of meetings with staff and reviewing a number of key documents such as partnership agreements, responsibility checklists and programme information. These arrangements would allow for the Core practice to be met.

2.70 For the BA (Hons) Theology, a comprehensive set of arrangements between the College and SMU is outlined in documentation that includes the Validation Agreement and the Schedule of Responsibilities. The representative from SMU who met the review team stressed that arrangements were working well, and the new cohort of first-year undergraduate students is positive about their learning experience. Additionally, the relationship with SMU fits the College's broad institutional strategy to work with other Christian traditions, including through its association with a Catholic university.

2.71 For the online MA Theology, the collaborative arrangements with the BibleMesh Institute are functioning effectively. A clear schedule of responsibilities is outlined in an MOA. Programme specifications are detailed, with arrangements allowing for a sharing of resources across both institutions. Online students are positive about the role of the BibleMesh Institute in delivering a high-quality course. Additionally, the relationship between UTC and BibleMesh fits the institutional teaching and learning strategy of using online delivery to broaden and internationalise the student cohort.

2.72 At the time of the review, only the partnership with the Kirby Laing Centre (KLC) was active across the three collaborative partners on the PhD programme. Providing a research-led community is a strategic goal of the College with each partner providing areas of specialisation through supervision that expands beyond the expertise of the College. However, the College is taking a cautious approach towards further student recruitment and will activate arrangements with Crosslands Training and the Davenant Institute when training arrangements for supervisors are more fully embedded.

2.73 The broad range of partnerships has been developed to fit the College's Teaching and Learning Strategy and the underpinning values and ethos of the College. The College is building strategic partnerships guided by its Partnership Principles and Procedures process in which partner institutions are expected to align with the ethos of the College. Partnerships are driven by the core mission of the College which is to create a multi-faith and international theological community driven by research. The highly-effective strategic partnerships which are closely aligned to the College's mission and aspirations are also addressed as **good practice** under Core practice S3.

2.74 The College has in place effective arrangements for partnerships to ensure that students receive a high-quality learning experience. Additionally, the College is ensuring that partnerships fit its mission and strategic goals. The Core practice is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Core practice: Met
Level of risk: Low

Core practice (Q9): The provider supports all students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes.

Findings

2.75 The College's Teaching and Learning Strategy endeavours to provide a high level of support to ensure that students are fully equipped to succeed academically and professionally in the field of theology. In addition, student placements are an important aspect of many students' learning experience, with employer engagement benefitting from relationships with the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and graduates from the PTFI Ministry Division employed in ministerial positions.

2.76 The team tested the College's approach to ensuring students are supported to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes by holding meetings with a range of staff and students, reviewing staff resources, performance data, policies and procedures, minutes of meetings and other documentation.

2.77 Learning support is embedded across all taught programmes. Formal structures have been established to ensure consistency in the quality of personal tutoring. Handbooks on personal tutoring for ministry students, online students and undergraduate students provide clear and comprehensive guidelines, arrangements, roles and responsibilities. The personal tutoring scheme includes a template for tutorial sessions which allows students to reflect on academic matters in advance of the meetings for the purpose of setting personal targets and actions. Mirroring the results of student surveys, students at a meeting with the review team were highly complimentary about their experience of personal tutoring. They also appreciated the accessibility and informal communication with personal tutors and staff members generally.

2.78 The College has been proactive in identifying ways to support students who arrive with the need for further study skills development. All students have access to resources designed to strengthen knowledge and embed skills in areas such as citing, referencing, academic conduct and writing a critical review. The Education Committee set up the Student Transition Task Group which has led to a change in approach towards delivering study skills over a period of time that extends beyond induction.

2.79 Performance data across programmes shows sound results with many students excelling with distinctions. The College supports students to achieve high grades through a range of approaches including targeted and detailed assessment feedback and providing exercises for students to critically examine their peer's work. Students emphasised the high quality of assessment feedback received from tutors and the opportunities it allowed for future improvement. Online postgraduate students with BibleMesh Institute shared the opinion that assessment feedback was of high quality and appreciated the posting of essays on the virtual learning environment to receive peer feedback. Students are also supported to achieve high grades through the provision of a wide range of resources, including journals and e-books and the extensive college library.

2.80 The College emphasises employability in programme design and co-curricular activities. As an institution of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, employer engagement is built into provision. Arrangements for work-based learning for ministry students have been formalised. To ensure the effective management of arrangements for the delivery of learning opportunities in student placements, the College has established a work-based learning opportunity (WBL) policy which is available on the college website and outlines the roles and responsibilities of the College and the placement provider. Students on work placements consider the arrangements to be working effectively and are complimentary about the support and mentoring they receive. Students believe the preparation for placements to be

effective and the College to be efficient in following up matters with the work placement supervisor. The review team considers the comprehensive and well targeted academic support which enables students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes to be **good practice**.

2.81 Students are well supported through a wide range of mechanisms including personal tutoring, materials to develop skills, assessment feedback and work placements. There are effective processes in place to support students in achieving successful academic and professional outcomes. The Core practice is met and the level of risk is low.

Core practice: Met

Level of risk: Low

Common practice (1): The provider reviews its Core practices for quality regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement.

Findings

2.82 Since the previous HER(AP) review of 2019 the College has established appropriate mechanisms to drive improvement and enhancement. A review of institutional practices has led to a formal system of annual monitoring and evaluation which is outlined in the Programme Design and Review Policy. Each Programme Coordinator utilises feedback from multiple sources to prepare an annual report. Faculty receives the annual programme reviews with the Education Committee monitoring the implementation of planned enhancements. From these reports the Principal compiles the College's Annual Report and Enhancement Plan.

2.83 To investigate its effectiveness, the review team analysed the evidence submitted by the College, including policies and procedures related to monitoring, monitoring reports of review and enhancement, met with members of the management and teaching teams, and spoke with students. These arrangements allow the Core practice to be met.

2.84 There are systematic arrangements which are effective in providing the College with opportunities to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision. The annual programme review is thorough, providing a clear structure by which to strengthen provision and make improvements through an explicit action plan. The College is responsive to recommendations and guidance from tutors, students and external sources. External examiner comments are used effectively to inform the annual review process which leads to adjustments and improvements. One outcome of this was the decision to open the Master of Divinity programme to non-Presbyterian candidates. Staff and students confirmed that their feedback is also leading to change in the College. Students contribute to the review process by providing input through representative meetings, membership of deliberative committees, online surveys and direct engagement in programme review meetings. To promote further student engagement, the College has launched a Making Your Voice Heard initiative to encourage feedback.

2.85 Additional arrangements provide further opportunities to review and develop practices to improve quality and drive enhancements. The College has established an internal institutional review every three years as outlined in the Periodic Review Procedures. The Periodic Review is conducted by a panel of independent experts who are senior academics and theologians, and was first undertaken in spring 2023. The draft report shows its outcomes to be comprehensive and detailed, providing the College with a valuable opportunity to reflect on practices and feed recommendations and actions into the institutional Enhancement Plan. The process has allowed a valuable opportunity for external scrutiny and self-assessment. This matter is also addressed as good practice under Core practice S4 and the effective use of external expertise in enhancing provision.

2.86 The team concludes that the College has established processes to reviews its Core practices for quality regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement. The Common practice is met and the level of risk is low.

Common practice: Met
Level of risk: Low

Common practice (2): The provider's approach to managing quality takes account of external expertise.

Findings

2.87 The Externality Policy outlines an embedded commitment to the use of external expertise in the College's governance, particularly within the Teaching and Learning Panel, the Higher Education Advisory Panel (HEAP), and through the use of programme external examiners. The Programme and Module Design and Review Policy outlines the process for new PTFI programme design, which includes external expert scrutiny of documentation, alongside external examiner feedback, and the annual review process. External examiner reports form part of the evidence considered during the review processes. In addition, a Periodic Review of academic provision has recently been completed with the panel consisting of external and student members.

2.88 The design allows the Core practice to be met as there are various opportunities for external expertise to be engaged with improving the quality of provision. Opportunities include engagement with deliberative committees, external examiner reports, external membership in governance, and external experts utilised in programme development and review, including periodic review. These processes would allow the Common practice to be met.

2.89 The Teaching and Learning Panel terms of reference state that the committee would normally include external members with appropriate experience in higher education. The minutes from the February and December Education Committees do not explicitly state who, among the attendees, are external panel members, although external membership was confirmed during the meetings with senior staff. The HEAP terms of reference include an expectation of up to eight external representatives with appropriate experience and expertise. These would normally be nominated by faculty. HEAP meetings have considered draft programme and module specifications and provided discussion related to quality in teaching and learning, assessment and resources.

2.90 External examiners are appointed for all programmes. External examiner comments relate to both academic standards and the quality of the student experience. Examiners give thorough consideration to matters related to curricula, teaching and assessment, and identify good practice. Examiner feedback includes comments about content, teaching mode, employability skill development and assessment, and demonstrate effective use of external expertise. The module level external examiner commentaries are less detailed and mainly concentrate on whether marking is fair and appropriate, although there are relevant comments - for example, around assessment feedback. External examiner feedback is appropriately considered by programme teams. Further evidence of responses is provided through the faculty consideration of examiners' reports which address specific recommendations.

2.91 External expertise is effectively used as part of programme design and evidences discussion in relation to skills development and curriculum delivery. The overview of external expertise in the PhD programme outlines both formal and informal consultation with external specialist academics, and the commentaries related to the MTh Old Testament and the MTh New Testament demonstrate areas where external expertise was sought and utilised.

2.92 The annual review process includes both module and programme-level commentaries and reports include a section related to externality. The use of external commentaries within these reports varies, and depends on the comments and recommendations provided by the external examiner. Where enhancements are suggested, these are considered. External examiner comments have also been used within periodic programme review reports where

these are interweaved into the narrative. The use of externality can be seen throughout the review processes. The Periodic Review itself was undertaken by a panel that included external members and the draft report comments favourably on the increasingly effective use of external expertise in many of the College's review and enhancement activities including on college panels and committees such as HEAP.

2.93 Externality is used effectively across the range of provision and supports the management and enhancement of quality. External expertise is utilised within the governance structure, in particular through HEAP, and in programme design and review. External examiner feedback is used well within the periodic review process for areas that relate to the quality of the student experience. The review team therefore conclude that the Common practice is met, and the level of risk is low.

Common practice: Met
Level of risk: Low

Common practice (3): The provider engages students individually and collectively in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience.

Findings

2.94 The College has a wide range of mechanisms to engage students in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience. There are student opportunities to participate in programme design, development and review, including both annual and periodic review processes. In relation to programme design and development, the Programme and Module Design and Review Policy outlines the process for new PTFI programme design which includes three stages - initial approval, interim approval, full and final approval. The second stage normally includes student consultation. The Periodic Review Procedures state that the review panel includes a student representative and notes that meetings with students form part of the review process, providing opportunities for both individual and collective student engagement. In addition, students engaged actively in developing the Student Submission and throughout the HER(AP) review process.

2.95 The design allows the Core practice to be met as it provides opportunities for both individual and collective student engagement in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience through opportunities within the design, development and review processes.

2.96 The review team tested the Common practice by considering documentation related to recent PTFI and undergraduate programme development and related to periodic review as well as considering the student perspective through the Student Submission and student meetings.

2.97 Student engagement in programme design and development can be seen in practice for the development of the MTh Old Testament and MTh New Testament. The narrative explaining the different stages and consultation points shows consideration of student feedback in relation to module choice and notes that the programme development documentation was informed by current students' comments. The formal feedback was collected both from current PTFI students and prospective students who had expressed an interest in the programme.

2.98 Student engagement in the validation of the new SMU programmes is also outlined in the BA (Hons) Theology Validation Document. This shows that students contributed effectively to the developmental process through previous module reviews and through a student representative on the Undergraduate Degree Working Group which developed the programme.

2.99 Student engagement in the recent periodic review can be seen in the student focus groups held for each programme. The focus groups were built around programme-specific questions, with the example provided suggesting questions related to strengths and weaknesses, and satisfaction with teaching and learning, assessment, resources and support. The Programme Reports generally show student feedback has been used in the programme evaluation, although the level of commentary is variable. The Student Submission confirms that students were extensively involved in the recent periodic review process, noting they participated in focus groups and as members of panels.

2.100 Students have been actively engaged in the current HER(AP) review process in meetings held at the College. Additionally the Lead Student Representative surveyed the student population prior to the review and held open meetings with a number of students both on campus and virtually in order to produce a detailed Student Submission.

2.101 Students are actively engaged in the development, assurance and enhancement of their educational experience. Students value the opportunities made available to them and feel that their input is valued. The review panel therefore conclude that this Common practice is met, and the level of risk is low.

Common practice: Met
Level of risk: Low

The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.102 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

2.103 All relevant Common and Core practices are met and the associated level of risk is low in all areas. There are two areas of good practice in the extensive commitment to research informed teaching and culture of scholarly activity, and in the comprehensive academic support provided for students.

2.104 There are two recommendations related to the need to provide transparent information for prospective students on the process for appealing an admissions decision, and ensuring that information on the complaints process aligns with that of the awarding body.

2.105 Additionally, there are two affirmations of courses of action being undertaken related to the increasing strategic focus to ensuring effective staffing and resource planning, and the actions to further enhance student engagement and improve module review response rates.

2.106 The review team concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities at the provider **meets** UK Expectations.

Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Definitions of key operational terms are also given in the [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\) handbook](#).

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer Glossary on the QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/glossary

Academic standards

The standards set by **degree-awarding bodies** for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

Award

A qualification, or academic credit, conferred in formal recognition that a student has achieved the intended **learning outcomes** and passed the assessments required to meet the academic standards set for a **programme** or unit of study.

Awarding organisation

An organisation authorised to award a particular qualification; an organisation recognised by Ofqual to award Ofqual-regulated qualifications.

Blended learning

Learning delivered by a number of different methods, usually including face-to-face and e-learning (see **technology enhanced or enabled learning**).

Common practices

Practices included in the UK Quality Code that will be applied by providers in line with their missions, their regulatory context and the needs of their students. These are practices common to the underpinning of quality in all UK providers but are not regulatory requirements for providers in England (registered with the Office for Students).

Core practices

Practices included in the UK Quality Code that must be demonstrated by all UK higher education providers as part of assuring their standards and quality.

Credit(s)

A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education **programmes of study**, expressed as numbers of credits at a specific level.

Degree-awarding body

A UK higher education provider (typically a university) with the power to award degrees, conferred by Royal Charter, or under Section 76 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or under Section 48 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, or by Papal Bull, or, since 1999, granted by the Privy Council on advice from QAA (in response to applications for taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers or university title).

Distance learning

A course of study that does not involve face-to-face contact between students and tutors but instead uses technology such as the internet, intranets, broadcast media, CD-ROM and video, or traditional methods of correspondence - learning 'at a distance'. See also **blended learning**.

Dual award or double award

The granting of separate awards (and certificates) for the same **programme** by two **degree-awarding bodies** who have jointly delivered the programme of study leading to them. See also **multiple award**.

e-learning

See technology enhanced or enabled learning.

Expectations

Statements in the **Quality Code** which clearly and succinctly express the outcomes providers should achieve in setting and maintaining the standards of their awards, and for managing the quality of their provision.

Flexible and distributed learning

A programme or module that does not require the student to attend classes or events at particular times and locations. See also **distance learning**.

Framework

A published formal structure. See also **framework for higher education qualifications**.

Framework for higher education qualifications

A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (FQHEIS).

Good practice

A process or way of working that, in the view of a QAA review team, makes a particularly positive contribution to a higher education provider's management of academic standards and the quality of its educational provision. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

Learning opportunities

The provision made for students' learning, including planned study, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, and resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios).

Learning outcomes

What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

Multiple awards

An arrangement where three or more **degree-awarding bodies** together provide a single jointly delivered **programme** (or programmes) leading to a separate **award** (and separate certification) of each awarding body. The arrangement is the same as for **dual/double awards**, but with three or more awarding bodies being involved.

Operational definition

A formal definition of a term, establishing exactly what QAA means when using it in reviews and reports.

Programme (of study)

An approved course of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

Programme specifications

Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of programmes of study, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

Quality Code

Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is the UK-wide set of **reference points** for higher education providers (agreed through consultation with the higher education community, and published by QAA), which states the **Expectations** (and associated, applicable, Core and Common practices) that providers are required to meet.

Reference points

Statements and other publications that establish criteria against which performance can be measured.

Self-evaluation document

A report submitted by a higher education provider, assessing its own performance, to be used as evidence in a QAA review.

Subject Benchmark Statement

A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or e-learning)

Learning that is delivered or supported through the use of technology.

Threshold academic standard

The minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic **award**. Threshold academic standards are set out in the national **frameworks** and **Subject Benchmark Statements**.

Virtual learning environment (VLE)

An intranet or password-only interactive website (also referred to as a platform or user interface) giving access to **learning opportunities** electronically. These might include such resources as course handbooks, information and reading lists; blogs, message boards and forums; recorded lectures; and/or facilities for online seminars (webinars).

Widening participation

Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.

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