



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

October 2016

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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 24 to 27 October 2016 and was conducted by a team of 3 reviewers, as follows:

- Dr Carol Vielba
- Mr Stephen Foster
- Dr Barbara Tarling (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Union Theological College, Belfast and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These expectations are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code)<sup>1</sup> 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
  - the information provided about higher education provision
  - the enhancement 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.

A summary of the findings can be found in the section starting on page 2. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 5.

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

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<sup>1</sup> The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code).

<sup>2</sup> QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us).

<sup>3</sup> Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers): [www.qaa.ac.uk/en/ReviewsAndReports/Pages/Educational-Oversight.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/ReviewsAndReports/Pages/Educational-Oversight.aspx).

## Key findings

### QAA's judgements about Union Theological College, Belfast

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at Union Theological College, Belfast.

- The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of the degree-awarding body and awarding organisation **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of the information about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

### Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice** at Union Theological College, Belfast.

- The culture of supporting students and the meticulous care taken to foster personal growth and academic attainment (Expectations B4 and B10).
- The strong sense of community and trust between students and staff, which enhances student engagement (Expectations B5 and Enhancement).
- The effective process for the early identification of individual students' needs for improved writing skills and the provision of appropriate academic support (Expectations B4 and B6).
- The highly productive relationship between the College and the Church, which supports the learning opportunities and the aspirations of individual ministry students (Expectation B10).

### Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to Union Theological College, Belfast.

By September 2017:

- formally document its academic framework for all Presbyterian Theological Faculty Ireland awards (Expectations A2.1 and A2.2)
- formally document and disseminate the procedures used for the approval, amendment, monitoring and review of Presbyterian Theological Faculty Ireland programmes (Expectations B1, A3.1, B8 and C).

### Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms** the following actions that Union Theological College, Belfast is already taking to make academic standards secure and/or improve the educational provision offered to its students:

- the steps being taken to align all Presbyterian Theological Faculty Ireland programmes to the FHEQ (Expectation A1)
- the steps being taken to provide training for student representatives on Queen's University Belfast and College committees (Expectation B5).

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).

## Financial sustainability, management and governance

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

## About Union Theological College

Union Theological College, Belfast (the College) was constituted in its current form by the Union Theological College of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland Act 1978. The College provides teaching in Theology for Queen's University Belfast (the University) and for awards of the Presbyterian Theological Faculty Ireland (PTFI). The College is accommodated in a historically important building in the university quarter of Belfast and is supported in the areas of finance, information technology and human resources by the central administration of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI).

The College's primary task is to prepare students for ministry in contemporary Ireland. The College's mission states that 'Union Theological College welcomes students from all backgrounds and perspectives to study Christian theology in a community of faith and scholarship. We are committed to:

- partnering with Queen's University Belfast in preparing students to make effective and positive contributions in our society and across the world
- equipping students for effective ministry within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland
- providing research-informed teaching and innovative approaches to learning and assessment.'

The Executive Principal leads nine full-time academic staff, 18 part-time academic staff and 10 professional services/administrative staff. There are 198 students studying at the College, of whom 195 are enrolled with the University. Of these, 25 students are enrolled to study for PTFI awards, 22 of whom are simultaneously enrolled to study University awards. Of the 195 students enrolled with the University, 157 are undergraduate students and 38 are undertaking postgraduate study.

There has been no significant material or strategic change since the October 2015 annual monitoring visit. Office and study accommodation for faculty and administrative staff has recently been re-organised and the exterior stonework of the building has been subject to major restoration.

The College cites its greatest challenge as the changed profile of the student body. The majority of undergraduates studying Theology no longer seek preparation for ordained Christian ministry and this requires adjustments to curriculum delivery. Ministry and church leadership is challenging given the changing nature of society, Irish culture north and south, and the changing ecclesiastical landscape. Postgraduate student recruitment and the development of an environment conducive to research and inquiry are also key challenges for the College.

The College provides teaching in Theology for the University. A Strategic Review of Theology commissioned by the University in June 2016 is to be published during the autumn of 2016.

The College delivers awards on behalf of PTFI. Power to award degrees and other awards in Theology was granted to PTFI by Royal Charter in 1881 and reaffirmed by Parliamentary

Act in 1978. The Act provides for a College faculty of not fewer than three professorial chairs. The Management Committee of the College is appointed by the General Assembly of the PCI and it operates within the structures of the PCI's Council for Training in Ministry. The internal government of the College is delegated to PTFI, including responsibility for all matters relating to academic standards. Thus, PTFI is a separate legal entity from the College while being formed by members of the College. PTFI awards are used for professional ministerial training within the PCI and occasionally for other denominational church bodies.

The College has addressed the recommendations from the 2012 Review for Educational Oversight report. Recent refinements to action planning include the addition of timelines and measures of effectiveness; student participation in the strategic development of the College has increased and plans are in place to train student representatives. The College recognises challenges remain following improvements to the IT infrastructure to increase the range and availability of wireless access connectivity.

## Explanation of the findings about Union Theological College, Belfast

This section explains the review findings in more detail.

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a [brief glossary](#) at the end of this report. A fuller [glossary of terms](#) is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the [review method](#), also on the QAA website.

# **1 Judgement: The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and/or other awarding organisations**

**Expectation (A1): In order to secure threshold academic standards, degree-awarding bodies:**

**a) ensure that the requirements of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)* are met by:**

- **positioning their qualifications at the appropriate level of the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **ensuring that programme learning outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **naming qualifications in accordance with the titling conventions specified in the frameworks for higher education qualifications**
- **awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined programme learning outcomes**

**b) consider and take account of QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics**

**c) where they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the specifications of the relevant national credit framework**

**d) consider and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards**

## **Findings**

1.1 The College is responsible for delivering awards offered in partnership with the University and PTFI. Ultimate responsibility for academic standards rests with the respective awarding partner. Each is responsible for setting academic standards during programme design, validation and review. The responsibilities and participatory contributions of the College in respect of the maintenance of academic standards are set out in the relevant documentation.

1.2 For University awards, responsibility for the development, approval and modification of awards rests with the University. The College is a constituent college of the University's Institute of Theology (IOT) and as such is required to work within the frameworks and regulations of the University. The College contributes to the oversight structures of the University, including those related to the maintenance of academic standards, through the IOT.

1.3 PTFI is responsible for the development, approval and modification of its awards. These vocational awards incorporate the guidelines and professional standards prescribed by the General Assembly of the PCI. Responsibility for the internal government of the College, including all matters relating to academic standards, resides with PTFI. PTFI is

formed by members of the College and is a separate legal entity from the College. These arrangements would enable the Expectation to be met.

1.4 The review team reviewed partnership and regulatory documents; documentation including programme specifications, validation and quality review reports; and the reports of external examiners. The review team held meetings with senior and teaching staff, and awarding partner representatives.

1.5 The evidence demonstrates the arrangements to be effective in practice. Each awarding partner appoints external examiners, who monitor achievement annually and confirm that threshold academic standards are met. Programme specifications and module descriptions are published in the IOT handbook and on the University website. For PTFI awards, information is contained in the College handbook and website.

1.6 The Annual Programme Review and Periodic Review procedures of the University explicitly address UK threshold academic standards. These confirm that the College fulfils its obligations to deliver awards at the appropriate level. The College's active participation in the IOT supports coordination and partnership. Two members of the College appointed as Assistant Directors of the IOT participate in the IOT Management Board, together with the College Principal. Part of the function of the Management Board is to ensure the maintenance of academic standards. Actions arising from reviews are addressed by the College in partnership with the IOT. Examples of involvement also include the College's contribution to the Module Review Group, where proposed changes to module specifications are considered collectively before final adjustment and implementation by the University.

1.7 The Council for Training in Ministry receives reports arising from the review processes applied to PTFI awards through the Curriculum Panel of the Management Committee of the College. The professional standards prescribed by the PCI are reviewed by the Church's Council for Training in Ministry and the Curriculum Panel of the College's Management Committee. These vocational awards include learning outcomes that develop skills needed to practice as a religious professional. The College recognises that the learning outcomes for PTFI awards must be aligned with the FHEQ, and work to review these against the FHEQ descriptors and the Subject Benchmark Statements for Theology and Religious Studies is in progress. The review team **affirms** the steps being taken to align all Presbyterian Theological Faculty Ireland programmes to the FHEQ.

1.8 While the awarding partners have ultimate responsibility, the College works effectively within its partnership agreements to manage its own responsibilities for ensuring adherence to external reference points. This is confirmed through quality review reports and the conclusions from external examiner reports. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**



**Expectation (A2.1): In order to secure their academic standards, degree-awarding bodies establish transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how they award academic credit and qualifications.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards**

**Findings**

1.9 The academic frameworks and regulations of each awarding partner govern how academic credit and qualifications are awarded. For University awards the College is required to work within the General Regulations, which are contained in the University undergraduate and postgraduate calendars. The system for the awarding of PTFI credit and qualifications are modelled on the processes of the University. The College is also guided by its overarching framework for the assessment of PTFI awards and the PCI's Council for Training in Ministry. The College operates within the frameworks of its awarding partners. These arrangements and processes would enable the College to meet the Expectation.

1.10 The review team examined documentation including the regulations of the University; reports by the Council for Training in Ministry; programme specifications; module descriptors; minutes of Quality Assurance Action Team, Curriculum Panel and PTFI assessment meetings; reports to the IOT; and external examiner reports. The team also met senior and teaching staff, and management involved in programme development and planning.

1.11 The review team learned that the arrangements work well in practice. Adherence to awarding partner regulations and policies is well established. The College works closely with the IOT to support coordination and the implementation of University policies and procedures. Subject boards constituted by the University make decisions on progress and awards. Access to programme specifications, and the frameworks and regulation of the University, are available on the University website.

1.12 Staff confirm that the frameworks and regulations for awarding PTFI credit and qualifications emulate those of the University. Where specific procedures for PTFI awards are extant they are documented and made available in the College handbook. The College implements PTFI's regulations for the award of credit and qualifications. Decisions about progress and awards are made formally in PTFI meetings. Staff demonstrate a well-developed understanding of the processes, however the framework and regulations require formalisation. The College recognise the need for further work in its review of PTFI awards. The review team **recommends** that, by September 2017, the College formally document its academic framework for all Presbyterian Theological Faculty Ireland awards.

1.13 The awarding partners have responsibility for academic frameworks and regulations. The review team is satisfied that the College is effective in adhering to the processes of its awarding partners. The need for the College to amend or update details in documentation will not require or result in major structural, operational or procedural change. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A2.2): Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve (and of subsequent changes to it) which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards**

**Findings**

1.14 Responsibility for maintaining the definitive records of programmes and qualifications delivered by the College rests with the awarding partners.

1.15 University programmes taught by the College are subject to the University's quality assurance procedures; the Memorandum of Agreement between the College and the University requires proposals for new programmes of study or modifications to existing ones to follow the standard procedures of the University's IOT. The University's Student Registry Service is responsible for maintaining student records, providing academic transcripts and issuing degree certificates.

1.16 Programmes and qualifications delivered on behalf of PTFI are designed to meet the personal and professional needs of students preparing for ministerial roles within the PCI, and are usually studied alongside the University's academic programmes. The definitive records for these programmes and qualifications are published in the College handbook, and their content and effectiveness is reviewed on a regular basis. PTFI maintains the transcripts for these awards and issues certificates to students on completion of their studies. These processes and procedures would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.17 The review team reviewed a range of documentation, including programme specifications, module descriptions and monitoring reports, and University and College handbooks. The team viewed the University and College websites and the University virtual learning environment (VLE). The team met senior and academic staff of the College, in addition to students and awarding partner representatives.

1.18 The evidence examined demonstrates the arrangements to be effective in practice. The College works closely with the IOT to ensure that it discharges its responsibilities appropriately in accordance with the University's academic frameworks and regulations. Programme specifications and module descriptions are reviewed annually and published in the College handbook and on the University website.

1.19 The requirements for PTFI awards are set out in the College handbook and are well understood by staff, students and members of the PCI. The programme and module specifications provided in the handbook act as the main reference point for delivery of the awards. However, the documentation is limited in scope and consequently the recommendation made under Expectation A2.1 that the College should document its framework for all PTFI awards also applies here.

1.20 The College works within its partnership agreements to fulfil its responsibilities for maintaining definitive records. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.1): Degree-awarding bodies establish and consistently implement processes for the approval of taught programmes and research degrees that ensure that academic standards are set at a level which meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification and are in accordance with their own academic frameworks and regulations.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.21 Ultimate responsibility for setting and approving standards at an appropriate level, and in accordance with academic frameworks, lies with the College's awarding partners. The approval of new and revised University programmes and modules is subject to the University's processes of formal scrutiny and approval. PTFI programmes are approved and amended using an approach that is modelled on the policies and procedures used by the University. In both cases the level of scrutiny and approval depends on the scale of change. The College is able to propose new programmes and amendments to both awarding partners. The systems and procedures in place for programme approval are discussed further in relation to Expectation B1.

1.22 The review team found that the College has policies and processes in place to ensure that academic standards are set at a level that meets UK threshold standards, and are in accordance with the academic frameworks and regulations of its awarding partners. These arrangements would enable the College to meet the Expectation.

1.23 The review team examined the Memorandum of Agreement with the University, policy documents, handbooks and committee minutes. The team met senior and teaching staff involved in programme development and awarding partner representatives.

1.24 The review team found that the processes for approval and amendment of University programmes are set out clearly on the University's website and are available to College staff. University processes pay attention to alignment with external and internal frameworks including levels, qualification descriptors, and credit frameworks. The processes for PTFI programmes are modelled on those deployed for University provision. No new programmes have been proposed or approved at the College recently. The team saw documentation demonstrating the process of approval of major and minor amendments to programmes for both awarding partners.

1.25 Amendments to University programmes are approved initially by subject boards and subsequently by the IOT's Education Committee. All approvals for new or amended programmes and modules must be endorsed by the University's Courses and Regulations Group. University templates for new provision and major amendments require information about levels and credit worth, learning outcomes, delivery and assessment. In order to assure further the standards of the new or revised provision, external examiners and/or advisers must be consulted.

1.26 Amendments to PTFI programmes are approved by the Curriculum Panel of the College and may reflect changes stemming from the internal review of courses or the changing requirements of the PCI. Staff are clear about the operation of processes for the approval and amendment of PTFI provision. Decisions are clearly recorded in committee minutes. However, the processes involved are not documented in the College handbook nor detailed explicitly in the Staff Induction Manual. The review team also found that the College pays close attention to standards in developing its PTFI programmes, as noted under Expectation B1. The recommendation that the College formally document and

disseminate the procedures to be employed for the amendment and approval of PTFI programmes made in Expectation B1 of this report is also relevant here.

1.27 The review team concludes that the College, with the support of its awarding partners, fulfils its responsibilities in programme approval. Programme approval procedures ensure that academic standards are set at a level that meets UK threshold standards and are in accordance with relevant academic frameworks and regulations. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.2): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only where:**

- **the achievement of relevant learning outcomes (module learning outcomes in the case of credit and programme outcomes in the case of qualifications) has been demonstrated through assessment**
- **both UK threshold standards and their own academic standards have been satisfied.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.28 Ultimate responsibility lies with the College's awarding partners for ensuring that credit and qualification are only awarded where relevant learning outcomes have been met through assessment, and threshold standards have been achieved. For University awards the College operates the assessment procedures prescribed in the University's regulations. The University operates a two-tier system of assessment boards, to which external examiners contribute. Provision is made for reasonable adjustments for students with additional needs. For PTFI programmes the College follows procedures set out in PTFI regulations. The PTFI meets formally to confirm grades and awards for students on PTFI programmes. The College is committed to making reasonable adjustments for PTFI students with additional needs.

1.29 The arrangements the College has in place are designed to ensure that credit and qualifications are only awarded when the learning outcomes and academic standards of the awarding partners have been met. These arrangements would enable the Expectation to be met.

1.30 To assess the effectiveness of the College's procedures for the assessment of learning outcomes and confirmation of achievement of threshold standards the review team read documents and reports, including University and College procedural documents, assessment board minutes and reports, and external examiners reports. The review team met senior and teaching staff responsible for the practice and oversight of assessment, awarding partner representatives and students.

1.31 For University awards assessment regulations are set out clearly and available to staff and students in the University handbooks and website. Staff and students are made aware of PTFI requirements through College handbooks and procedural documents. Further information about the systems in place for the assessment of students at the College, and their operation, can be found under Expectation B6.

1.32 Academic standards are assured through programme and assessment design, and through internal and external moderation for both University and PTFI programmes. Documentation makes clear the intended learning outcomes of modules and programmes and the criteria used for assessing their demonstration by students. Marks and grades are approved in accordance with awarding partner procedures. For University awards decisions to award credit and qualifications are taken by formally constituted bodies under delegated authority from the Senate. For PTFI awards authority is delegated by the PCI. External examiners confirm that academic standards are comparable to those of other institutions; that UK threshold standards are met; and that assessment practices and the conduct of assessment boards are fair and effective.

1.33 The review team found that the College operates the assessment regulations of its awarding partners effectively and fairly. The College has in place systems prescribed by its awarding partner that are designed to ensure fairness and security of the award of credit and qualifications. These systems include provision for the consideration of mitigating circumstances, penalties for late work, and penalties for academic misconduct. Reasonable adjustments are made to avoid disadvantaging students with protected characteristics and additional needs. Students on University programmes are eligible to receive credit for prior learning. The decision to award such credit is endorsed by the relevant examination board to ensure equitability and the maintenance of standards.

1.34 Evidence from the documentation and meetings shows that the College, in partnership with its awarding partners, is effective in operating processes for the assessment of learning outcomes that ensure that credit and qualifications are only awarded where UK and awarding partner standards have been met. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.3): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that processes for the monitoring and review of programmes are implemented which explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual degree-awarding body are being maintained.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.35 Ultimate responsibility for the monitoring and review of programmes to ensure that threshold standards are achieved, and the requirements of their respective academic frameworks are met, lies with the awarding partners. For University programmes there is a system of annual review of programmes and periodic review of the College as a collaborative partner. For PTFI provision there is a system of annual review of awards and occasional periodic review of the College and its provision. The processes in place for the monitoring and review of College provision are discussed further under Expectation B8.

1.36 The review team found that the College has policies and processes in place for programme monitoring and review that are designed to check whether UK threshold standards are achieved and the academic standards of the awarding partners are being maintained. These arrangements would enable the College to meet the Expectation.

1.37 To assess the effectiveness of the College's procedures for programme monitoring and review the review team examined documentary evidence including monitoring and other reports, and external examiners' remits and reports. The team also held meetings with senior and teaching staff and awarding partner representatives.

1.38 The review team found the arrangements to work effectively in practice. University module review includes consideration of the appropriateness and achievement of module learning outcomes and the linkage between modules and programme aims. Annual monitoring of University provision examines student progression and completion data, degree outcomes, and employment data. External examiners' reports feed into the annual monitoring process. These reports include comment on the attainment of intended learning outcomes by students, and the appropriateness of delivery and assessment for the level of study. External examiners also make comparisons between the standards achieved by College students and those found elsewhere in UK higher education. The annual reporting process for research degrees analyses student data on progression and completion, and external examiners' comments on the standards achieved by candidates. Periodic review of University programmes includes examination of programme specifications, annual monitoring documentation and external examiner reports.

1.39 Annual monitoring of PTFI provision includes checking on the appropriateness of intended learning outcomes, the fit between modules and the programme to which they contribute, and student performance. External examiners on PTFI programmes are asked to comment on standards, which are expected to be comparable to those in place for the University's programmes. The work currently being undertaken on the development of PTFI awards includes discussion of the aims, content and delivery of ministerial training.

1.40 The College is managing its responsibilities for monitoring and reviewing programmes by effectively implementing the annual and periodic review processes of its awarding partners. The College, with the support of its awarding partners, operates effective monitoring and review processes, which demonstrate that UK threshold standards are

achieved and the academic standards of the awarding partners are maintained. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**



**Expectation (A3.4): In order to be transparent and publicly accountable, degree-awarding bodies use external and independent expertise at key stages of setting and maintaining academic standards to advise on whether:**

- **UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and achieved**
- **the academic standards of the degree-awarding body are appropriately set and maintained.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.41 The awarding partners are ultimately responsible for making use of external and independent expertise to set and maintain academic standards. The University uses external expertise in the design, operation and review of programmes. External panel members participate during programme design, validation and periodic review. External examiners are appointed by the University to report on threshold academic standards.

1.42 For PTFI awards curriculum content is aligned with the requirements of the General Assembly of the PCI, which comprises senior members of the Church. External examiners are appointed by PTFI to oversee the academic standards of the awards and provide an independent external perspective. These arrangements would enable the College to meet the Expectation.

1.43 The review team examined a range of documentation including programme specifications, module descriptors, minutes of meetings, and external examiners' reports. The team also held meetings with senior and teaching staff, students, and representatives of awarding partners.

1.44 The review team found these arrangements to work effectively in practice. External examiners are key in providing external independent expertise across the provision. For University awards responses to external examiners' reports are created at the University; reports are discussed at the University-convened subject boards and any matters of concern raised directly with the College Principal. For both awards, external examiners reports are reviewed by programme teams and discussed by the Curriculum Panel. Outcomes of external examiner reports are incorporated in Annual Programme Reviews and in the College's Quality Assurance Action Plan.

1.45 The College responds simultaneously to the strategic directions of the PCI and the University. The College also maintains very close links with the PCI, which engages the College with practitioner clergy and informs the academic practices in the College. Senior clergy are an integral part of the College leadership and this also provides constructive input into curriculum development monitoring and review.

1.46 The College is managing its responsibilities for maintaining academic standards and the use of external and independent expertise. The awarding partners have ultimate responsibility for setting and maintaining academic standards, and for making use of external and independent expertise appropriately. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and/or other awarding organisations: Summary of findings

1.47 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. All the Expectations for this judgement area are met with a low level of associated risk.

1.48 The review team make one recommendation in this area, which relates to the following: document the College's academic framework for all PTFI awards (Expectations A2.1 and A2.2). There is also a recommendation in Section 2 of this report that is relevant to this area.

1.49 The review team makes one affirmation in this section, which relates to the steps being taken to align all PTFI programmes to the FHEQ (Expectation A1). The team identified no features of good practice in this area.

1.50 Despite the recommendation and affirmation in this judgement area, the review team is confident that the College is aware of the significance of these matters and has proposed to rectify them. All of the applicable Expectations have been met. The recommendation in this area reflects completion of an activity already underway and a need to amend or update details in documentation, where the amendment will not require or result in a major structural, operational or procedural change.

1.51 The review team concludes that the maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of the degree-awarding body and awarding organisation at the College **meets** UK expectations.

## 2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities

**Expectation (B1): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes**

### **Quality Code, Chapter B1: Programme Design, Development and Approval**

#### **Findings**

2.1 The College works within the frameworks for design, development and approval provided by its awarding partners. Policies and procedures for the approval of new University programmes and modules, and the amendment of existing ones, are set out on the University website. New University programmes entail a multi-stage process involving subject boards; the IOT and its Education Committee; and the IOT's parent faculty. Amendments to programmes and new modules are signed off at IOT level. All major programme amendments have to be endorsed by the University's Curriculum Review Group. Minor changes are approved by the IOT and notified to the Curriculum Review Group. The University uses standard templates to ensure consistency in decision making, and requires consultation with stakeholders including external examiners and/or advisers for new provision and major amendments.

2.2 The approval and amendment of PTFI programmes is undertaken using policies and procedures that have been modelled on those used by the University. These processes are not formally documented by PTFI in a handbook or other formal document. Minor amendments to PTFI programmes are approved by the College's Curriculum Panel and reported to the College Management Committee. Major amendments to PTFI programmes require approval from the Council for Training in Ministry and the General Assembly of the Church. New programmes would follow a similar route.

2.3 The review team found that the College's own processes, together with its adherence to the procedures for the design, development and approval of programmes specified by its awarding partners, would enable the College to meet the Expectation.

2.4 To test the effectiveness of the College's approach to programme design, development and approval the review team examined the College's Memorandum of Agreement with the University, University policy documents, handbooks, reports and committee minutes. The team also met senior and teaching staff, and awarding partner representatives.

2.5 Overall, the arrangements for the design, development and approval of programmes operate effectively. The College is able to propose new programmes to both awarding partners. Examples of the approval of amendments to existing programmes relating to both awarding partners demonstrate that the College follows the policies and procedures laid down by its awarding partners carefully and consistently. The University's website details the procedures to be followed, together with advice about their operation. This information is available to all College staff; those met by the review team were familiar with these processes and their responsibilities for operating them. College staff are able to draw upon the University for advice and guidance on programme design.

2.6 College staff are well informed about how to make amendments to PTFI programmes and the processes involved in their approval. The presence of members of

PTFI within the College ensures effective communication and understanding about approval processes and expectations regarding design, content and learning outcomes. However, the underlying policies, and the details of the systems, processes and procedures involved, are not fully and systematically described and available to staff. Programme approval and amendment is absent from the College handbook - nor is it explicit in the Staff Induction Manual. New staff are briefed orally on how such processes work. The College relies heavily on informal systems and tacit knowledge of University systems in relation to the development and approval of its PTFI awards. This approach currently operates effectively. However, in order to strengthen further the quality assurance of its provision, the review team **recommends** that, by September 2017, the College formally document and disseminate the procedures used for the approval, amendment, monitoring and review of Presbyterian Theological Faculty Ireland programmes.

2.7 Students are involved in the updating and amendment of existing programmes through the presence of student representatives on University and College committees. For University awards, a student sits on the panel that approves new programmes. Programme development is discussed at the IOT's Staff Student Consultative Committee. The University expects students to be consulted on programme changes. Students are formally involved in the approval of new and amended PTFI provision through the student representative on the Curriculum Panel.

2.8 The College is effective in adhering to the procedures of its awarding partners and implementing its own processes for the design, development and approval of programmes. These processes operate appropriately. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B2): Recruitment, selection and admission policies and procedures adhere to the principles of fair admission. They are transparent, reliable, valid, inclusive and underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and processes. They support higher education providers in the selection of students who are able to complete their programme.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission to Higher Education**

**Findings**

2.9 The College has no responsibility for the selection and admission of students for either of its awarding partners. Students for the ministry of the PCI are selected and admitted as the result of a Church-led application process. PTFI has no direct involvement in the selection of suitable applicants but provides academic advice on the degree programme that successful candidates will pursue as part of their training for ordained ministry.

2.10 The selection of students for the ministry of the PCI is overseen by the Church's Council for Training in Ministry. Applicants have to be approved by their local congregation and presbytery, and are required to complete the Accredited Preachers Course organised by the Council before embarking on their studies at the College. Most applicants register for a degree qualification with the University alongside their programme of ministerial studies.

2.11 Students who are registered for University awards are selected and admitted by the University. The College participates actively in recruitment events and Open Days organised by the University and the IOT. The College also leads in building relationships with local schools but has no control over admissions policies and processes.

2.12 Prospective students wishing to study the University's undergraduate programmes on a full-time basis apply through UCAS. Applications for part-time study are processed by the University, while applications for taught postgraduate programmes in Theology and proposals from prospective research students are handled by the IOT. Complaints and appeals relating to admissions are handled by the University's Directorate of Academic and Student Affairs. The relevant policies and procedures are published on the University website and there are clear guidelines for complainants to follow.

2.13 The recruitment, selection and admission processes are out of scope for this review since they are undertaken by an awarding partner in one case and by the Church in the other. In each case, however, the process is transparent, reliable and inclusive and is underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and procedures. The students met by the review team reported that they found the admission processes to be clear and straightforward, and that the information provided in the College prospectus and on the University and College websites was appropriate for their needs.

2.14 The College's retention and completion rates are excellent and student satisfaction rates are very high, which supports the view that the students selected for admission have the ability to complete the programmes of their respective awarding partners.

2.15 The College operates effectively within its partnership agreements. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B3): Higher education providers, working with their staff, students and other stakeholders, articulate and systematically review and enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices, so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner, study their chosen subject(s) in depth and enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking.**

**Quality Code, *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching***

**Findings**

2.16 The College works closely with its awarding partners to review and enhance teaching and learning. Review of student feedback is systematic. Annual and module review include reflection upon learning opportunities and teaching practices, and external examiner comment.

2.17 The College's strategic approach to the review and enhancement of learning opportunities and teaching practices is reflected in the College's Quality Assurance Action Plan. Enhancement objectives include peer review, staff appraisal and training, student mentoring and the process for students considered at risk. The arrangements in place would allow the College to meet the Expectation.

2.18 The review team examined the effectiveness of teaching and learning procedures by reading relevant documentation including the College's Quality Assurance Action Plan, meeting minutes, peer review documentation and staff appraisals. The review team also considered module evaluation forms, student feedback, and progression and achievement data. The team met senior, teaching and professional support staff, students, and awarding partners representatives.

2.19 The review team found the arrangements in place to be effective in practice. The College's Quality Assurance Action Team has oversight of the actions planned to enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices. Students and staff work together to develop the plan and monitor progress. Members of the Quality Assurance Action Team communicate actions to the groups they represent.

2.20 The learning and teaching resources are effective and consistent with the requirements of the awards delivered. Staff have relevant industry experience and qualifications appropriate to the vocational nature of the provision. Appropriate induction arrangements are in place for new staff. The College supports the professional development of individual staff through its Sabbatical Leave Policy and through financial support for staff participation in conferences. College staff confirm the benefit of the development opportunities provided by the University, which include training on assessment and training for new postgraduate research supervisors. Annual staff appraisal includes reference to training undertaken and training needs. Staff confirm the value of peer review of teaching, which is undertaken across discipline and supports reflective practice.

2.21 Module descriptors, teaching and assessment arrangements are clearly described in the College and University handbooks. These and the University website inform students of the learning pathways, opportunities, additional services and resources available to support students in achieving their aspirations.

2.22 Students receive structured guidance and support through the College's system of pastoral groups. Induction includes introduction to the peer mentoring arrangements and the support available to enable students to develop their writing skills. The College's policy of identifying students' engagement with their programme on the basis of attendance and

achievement, and the allocation of personal tutors, enables the timely implementation of pastoral or academic support to be implemented.

2.23 Students' capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking is encouraged through progressively intellectually demanding study. Ways in which students are encouraged to self-assess their progress include reflecting on videos of their presentations, feedback from their fellow students and reflective journals. Close working relationships between students and teaching staff are enhanced by regular informal meetings. These arrangements are effective in supporting students' transition to higher education and their development as independent learners. Students the review team met were very positive about their experiences, considered staff to be very approachable and valued the informal opportunities for discussion highly.

2.24 The College is committed to enhancing learning opportunities and teaching practices and has appropriate oversight. The College engages with internal and external stakeholders to enable students to develop as independent learners. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B4): Higher education providers have in place, monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement**

**Findings**

2.25 Strategic oversight of resource planning rests with the College's Management Committee. Matters of resource are discussed by the College's Finance, Property and Administration Panel, which reports to the Management Committee. Arrangements related to the curriculum are discussed in the College's Curriculum Panel, which also reports to the Management Committee. Where appropriate, matters arising are included in the College's Quality Assurance Action Plan and progress monitored by the Quality Assurance Action Team. Arrangements to monitor and evaluate student development and achievement are systematically reviewed using the University module and annual review processes. Review processes modelled on those of the University are applied to PTFI awards. The development and achievement of ministerial students is also monitored through the work of the Dean of Ministerial Studies and Development and reported to the PCI's Council for Training in Ministry.

2.26 The College provides a range of resources for students including the significant theological collection housed in the Gamble Library. Networked computers, printers, and scanning and copying facilities are also available. Those enrolled on University awards have access to the University library and online services. Programme information, including guidance and the available support arrangements is provided in College handbooks, the College prospectus, University handbooks and the University website. The arrangements in place would enable the College to meet the Expectation.

2.27 The review team examined the effectiveness of the College's arrangements and resources by scrutinising documents including those relevant to monitoring and review; minutes of meetings; and guidance information for students, including handbooks that describe the resources and support available. The team also held meetings with senior, teaching and professional support staff, students and awarding partner representatives.

2.28 The procedures for implementing, monitoring and evaluating arrangements and resources work effectively in practice. Review arrangements facilitate timely reflection and enable changes to be made where appropriate. For example, recent enhancements include the College's use of online submission and marking of assignments, the move to concurrent teaching of two languages, and the change from lecture to workshop delivery.

2.29 Information for students about their study choice and the support available is clear and accessible in handbooks and on the respective University or College website. Students are introduced to the facilities and resources and provided with a tour during the welcome and induction programme. Important information is provided including that about the support resources available to ensure a successful transition into higher education. Towards the end of the second semester the College engages students in module fairs to encourage discussion and enable informed decisions about future module selection.

2.30 The arrangements in place and the clear information provided support students in their understanding of what is required from them to succeed at each stage of their study. A comprehensive range of pastoral and personal advice and guidance is provided by the College in partnership with the University including accommodation, finance, welfare, careers guidance and counselling.



2.31 Support for developing study skills is provided by both the College and the University. The College observed that the performance of some students was inhibited by poor writing skills. Consequently, the College implemented a traffic light system for all written submissions to enable prompt identification of those students who needed additional help. Identification of the need for additional support prompts a student tutor meeting for early targeted feedback. Subsequent additional support includes workshops to improve writing skills, guidance notes and website resources. The College may also refer students to the University for one-to-one support. The effective process for the early identification of individual students' needs for improved writing skills and the provision of appropriate academic support is **good practice**.

2.32 Students confirm that assessment becomes more challenging as they progress through their studies. The completion of reflective learning journals and their use of video recordings for critical self-reflection and improvement support students' move towards independent learning, self-efficacy and self-reflection. Students critique the work of their peers and provide feedback.

2.33 The College's supportive culture is very strong and this ethos promotes personal growth and academic attainment throughout students' learning experience. The College's 'at risk policy', through which student attendance at lectures and tutorials is monitored, enables additional support to be implemented as appropriate. Formal support arrangements include the advice and guidance of an allocated personal tutor, and there is a structured system of pastoral groups. These arrangements, and the student-led peer mentoring, are valued by students and effective in supporting students' development and transition between levels. The student-led peer mentoring has an academic coordinator who oversees the recruitment and training of the lead mentor and the team of student mentors.

2.34 The transition into congregational ministry of students studying for PTFI awards is meticulously organised. Students are placed in a congregation while continuing their studies. Detailed feedback and guidance on their performance while engaged in these practical and professional parts of their programme supports students in developing their academic, personal and professional potential. This is detailed further under Expectation B10. To support placement learning the College, in close collaboration with the PCI, provides informative handbooks for practitioners and students. The students value the arrangements in place to enable them to develop their academic, personal and professional potential. The culture of supporting students and the meticulous care taken to foster personal growth and academic attainment is **good practice**.

2.35 The College has effective arrangements to enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B5): Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B5: Student Engagement**

**Findings**

2.36 Student engagement at the College operates on both formal and informal levels. On a formal level, students have a voice in a range of management, governance and consultative committees. Annually, students elect two representatives from each year group to serve on the General Student Council. This Council organises social events and liaises with the Principal and faculty on matters relating to College life. Ministry students also participate in the Ministerial Students Council, the president of which is a member of the College Management Committee. In addition, student representatives are elected to serve on the IOT's Staff Student Consultative Committee, where matters relating to teaching and learning are discussed and concerns are referred to the appropriate decision-making bodies. There is also a student member of the IOT's Module Review Group.

2.37 Student representatives are enthusiastic and committed members of the College's Quality Assurance Action Team and are pleased at the way the College has responded to their concerns and incorporated measures to address them in its Quality Assurance Action Plans. Part of their remit is to communicate these changes to the groups they represent, thus closing the feedback loop. Students are also active members of the College's Library Users' Forum, which meets every semester to share information about library developments and to suggest areas for improvement.

2.38 On an informal level, the daily coffee break is actively promoted as an occasion for relaxed exchanges of views between students and staff. Overall, these measures would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.39 To assess the effectiveness of the steps taken by the College to engage students the review team examined a range of evidence including action plans, survey and focus group data, committee minutes and module evaluation feedback. The team also met students from every year group, including a number of elected representatives, and held meetings with senior, teaching and professional support staff, and awarding partner representatives.

2.40 The College and the IOT pay close attention to student feedback and keep their curriculum, teaching methods and assessment strategies under continual review in order to create a rich and effective learning experience and achieve the best outcomes for students. Students confirm that their views are appreciated and that the College will act on them if possible. The Quality Assurance Action Plan 2015-16 contains several examples of changes made in response to student feedback, including revisions to the timetable and improvements in the amount and detail of assignment feedback.

2.41 Surveys conducted at the end of each module enable students to comment on their lecturers' approach to teaching, as well as the module content and delivery. Both the College and the IOT are highly responsive to this feedback and teaching staff are able to cite a number of instances of changes to curriculum content and delivery in response to student comments. The results of the module surveys are made available to all students through the University VLE and the College notice boards.

2.42 Staff and students attach a high value to the daily coffee break, which is well attended and which encourages engagement by providing the opportunity for relaxed

exchanges of views in an informal setting. Students appreciate the inclusive collegial environment and the approachability and accessibility of all staff, including senior staff. Students value the attention paid to individual student concerns highly and they express a strong sense of partnership in the assurance and enhancement of their learning. The strong sense of community and trust between students and staff, which enhances student engagement, is **good practice**.

2.43 Their membership of formal committees enables students to engage with the College's strategic development and its quality enhancement processes. Once the student elections are complete the College plans to arrange training sessions to support the newly elected representatives in their roles, which will further enhance the effectiveness of student engagement. The review team **affirms** the steps being taken to provide training for student representatives on Queen's University Belfast and College committees.

2.44 The College has effective formal and informal mechanisms to engage students individually and collectively in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience. These arrangements are working well; students' contributions are encouraged, supported and valued. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B6): Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning**

**Findings**

2.45 The College works with the assessment policies and frameworks provided by its awarding partners. For University awards these are set out in the University calendars for undergraduate and postgraduate studies. Further guidance about assessment policies and practices is available in handbooks and on the University website.

2.46 The College has an internal document that provides an overarching framework for the assessment of PTFI awards. Details of assessment policies and practices for individual PTFI awards are set out in handbooks. General guidance for staff on assessment for all programmes is included in the College's Staff Induction Manual. The College has policies and processes for assessment and recognition of prior learning, which are intended to enable students to demonstrate their achievement of learning outcomes and to underpin the award of credit and qualifications. The College's own approach, together with its adherence to the assessment regulations of its awarding partners, would enable it to meet the Expectation.

2.47 The review team reviewed the effectiveness of the College's processes for assessment by examining documentary evidence including the University assessment regulations, handbooks, the VLE, assessment board minutes, and reports including those of external examiners. The team also met senior and teaching staff, awarding partner representatives and students.

2.48 The evidence demonstrated effective procedures in operation. Student handbooks contain details of assessment and grading schemes. Further detail on assessment criteria and marking of individual assignments is given in course material and explained by lecturers at the beginning of each course. Detailed assessment criteria and generic marking criteria are provided in handbooks. The University employs a generic marking criteria, the Conceptual Equivalents Scale, which identifies the quality of work that will be awarded at different grades at different levels of study. The same scales are used to grade academic work for PTFI awards. Different criteria apply to the assessment of practical and professional units within PTFI awards, particularly to placements (see Expectations B4 and B10).

2.49 Systems of internal moderation are in place, including double marking. External examiners approve assignments and examination papers in advance. They also moderate samples of work and provide comments on the assessment process and award of marks. Students submit, and receive back, written assignments electronically. Assignments are marked anonymously where practical and appropriate.

2.50 Assessment policies, regulations and processes are explicit and transparent. University assessment regulations are available on its website. Assessment regulations for PTFI awards are published in the College handbook. Assessment schemes and assessment criteria are made available to students in handbooks, course materials and through the University intranet. Students consider themselves well informed about what to do to pass their courses and the assessment criteria and marking schemes used to grade their work.

2.51 Those studying on University programmes expect to receive feedback on their work within three weeks. Students on both University and PTFI programmes find the feedback on their written assignments to be both timely and helpful. There are ample opportunities for students to receive additional and informal feedback. Generic and individual feedback on examination performance is also available, although not all students are fully aware of these opportunities. Students on PTFI programmes studying for the ministry receive detailed feedback and guidance on their skills development and performance on practical and professional parts of their programme (see Expectations B4 and B10).

2.52 The College identified the need for students to develop their writing skills to enable them to demonstrate effectively that they have met learning outcomes. The College uses a traffic light feedback system that identifies levels of writing skills in all submitted assignments. Poor ratings result in students meeting their tutor to discuss how to improve. To help students address identified weaknesses the College has prepared written guidance and organises additional training sessions provided by the University's Learning Development Service. The effective early identification of individual need for improved writing skills, and the provision of appropriate support, is identified as good practice under Expectation B4.

2.53 Policies are in place to deal with academic malpractice and advice is given to students on good academic practice. The policies are detailed in College handbooks, and further advice and guidance is provided during induction, at key points in the year, and within individual courses. For University awards details of the processes for the investigation and handling of suspected academic misconduct is contained in the University calendars. The University does not permit the use of plagiarism-detection software on undergraduate programmes. Software is used to check for plagiarism in postgraduate work and research theses.

2.54 For PTFI awards those suspected of academic misconduct are referred to the Principal, who may summon the student to a formal hearing and refer the case for a decision to the Church's Board of Christian Training and the student's presbytery. The review team saw papers relating to a recent case that demonstrated that the College operates fair and effective processes in dealing with academic misconduct.

2.55 The recognition of prior learning for students studying for University awards is considered under University regulations. For those studying PTFI awards, the recognition of prior learning is reflected in the arrangements for a student's programme of study, which take account of prior theological studies.

2.56 The College states that it is committed to facilitating those with disabilities to study as an integral part of its community. This commitment includes making arrangements for reasonable adjustments to assessment processes for students that have additional needs. The University provides the College with advice on adjustments that should be made for those studying on University awards.

2.57 Processes are in place to deal with mitigating circumstances that may affect a student's assessment performance or ability to complete an assessment on time. For those studying for University awards, applications are handled by the IOT's Exceptional Circumstances Committee. PTFI students apply to the College Principal: a standard template for consideration of their extenuating circumstances is used and considered at a meeting of PTFI. Both awarding partners have policies in place that penalise students for late submission of coursework without an approved extension.

2.58 For University provision, decisions about marks and grades are taken at formally constituted assessment boards, at which external examiners are present. The two-tier system of subject and programme boards operate under delegated authority from the

Senate. University students receive their marks electronically through the University's system. For PTFI awards the arrangements for the confirmation of marks is formally described in a College document. Marks are confirmed at biannual meetings of PTFI; degree classifications are finalised at the end of the academic year and students informed of their results by email. The performance of ministerial track students is considered by the PCI's Ministerial Studies and Development Committee and recommendations made to the Council for Ministerial Training on the issuance of licenses.

2.59 The College reviews the effectiveness of its assessment and feedback policies on a regular basis through student feedback, external examiners' comments and the annual monitoring process. The review team saw examples of effective action taken to address weaknesses such as earlier student dissatisfaction with the quality of feedback received and also of innovative approaches to assessment such as the use of posters. Advice on good practice in assessment and feedback is available on the University's website from the University's Centre for Educational Development. College staff have also participated in Centre for Educational Development events on assessment.

2.60 Effective arrangements are in place at the College to ensure that students have appropriate opportunities to demonstrate the extent of their achievement of the intended learning outcomes for the award of credit and qualification. The College, in conjunction with its awarding partners, operates equitable, valid and reliable assessment processes, and students are supported to demonstrate their learning through assessment and the recognition of prior learning. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B7): Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B7: External Examining**

**Findings**

2.61 Each awarding partner defines the role, and the criteria for approval, of the external examiners appointed for their respective awards. For University awards the comprehensive arrangements are accessible on the University website. For PTFI awards arrangements are described in a College document.

2.62 For both awards assignments and examination papers are approved by external examiners in advance of distribution to students. Samples of work are moderated and comments provided on the assessment process and award of marks. For University awards the University's Directorate of Academic and Student Affairs acknowledges receipt of the examiners' reports and communicates these to affiliated colleges through the IOT. The College works with the external examiner system and regulations of each awarding partner. These arrangements would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.63 The review team reviewed the effectiveness of these procedures in practice by examining documentation including external examiner reports, associated module review reports, annual review reports, annual review of research degree programmes, periodic review reports, and the regulatory requirements of both awarding partners. The team also held meetings with senior and teaching staff, students, and awarding partner representatives.

2.64 Overall, the evidence reviewed showed the procedures to be effective in practice. For University awards external examiners are present at formally constituted assessment boards. Matters arising from external examiner reports that impact on module teaching are discussed at subject boards comprised of affiliated colleges. Specific concerns arising from external examiner reports would be raised directly with the Principal. The University creates responses to external examiners and feedback is also provided during a meeting of external examiners at the University.

2.65 For the College, reflection on external examiner reports for both awarding partners is embedded through incorporation into the monitoring and review processes. Reports are considered by the College's Curriculum Panel and by PTFI. Where appropriate, the College's Quality Assurance Action Team includes and monitors the progress of actions related to recommendations and best practice observations in the Quality Assurance Action Plan. External examiner reports are generally positive. Feedback from external examiner reports is disseminated to academic and support staff by email and through the College meeting structure. For University students external examiner reports are made available in full on the VLE. For PTFI students external examiner reports are made available on request.

2.66 The College works effectively with its awarding partners to make effective use of external examiners. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B8): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and for review of programmes.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review**

**Findings**

2.67 The College's awarding partners have overall responsibility for monitoring and review of the provision to ensure that appropriate standards are set and maintained, and that the quality of learning opportunities is assured and enhanced. University awards are subject to the University's processes of review. Annual and periodic review of the University's IOT includes the College as one of the constituent colleges. Annual monitoring and review of PTFI awards follows procedures modelled on the University's processes. The PCI periodically commissions reviews of the College and its provision. These arrangements would enable the Expectation to be met.

2.68 To test the effectiveness of the College's procedures the review team examined policy documents, handbooks, the Memorandum of Agreement, monitoring and periodic review reports, action plans and minutes of meetings. The review team also held meetings with senior, teaching and professional support staff, students, and awarding partner representatives.

2.69 The evidence demonstrated the arrangements for programme monitoring and review to be effective in practice. All University modules are reviewed shortly after delivery. Review includes student feedback, assessment outcomes, staff reflection and available external comment. Changes and improvement can be proposed, some of which may lead to minor or major amendments. Individual module reviews are considered by a Module Review Group, comprising staff responsible for the modules under review and student representatives.

2.70 Annual programme reviews for undergraduate, postgraduate and research degree programmes prepared for the IOT include student data, student feedback, external examiners' comments, and module reviews. Annual programme reviews are discussed by the IOT and oversight is maintained by academic affairs and committees of the University, including the Collaborative Provision Group and the University's Education Committee. The arrangements for the monitoring and review of research degrees are discussed in further under Expectation B11.

2.71 University review of collaborative provision is on a five-year cycle and linked to the renewal of legal documentation. The last periodic review by the University of the IOT and its constituent colleges took place in 2015. The periodic review panel noted the planned IOT curriculum review of all its undergraduate provision in response to the University's plans to change the structure of the academic year. A Strategic Review of Theology by the University took place this year as part of the University's development of its long-term vision and strategy. At the time of this QAA review visit the publication of the Strategic Review of Theology is awaited.

2.72 Details of the processes involved in University monitoring and review are available to all staff on the University website. Staff are well informed about the University's procedures and their roles within them.

2.73 The Memorandum of Agreement between the College and the University contains clauses that protect the interest of students in the event of programme closure.



2.74 For PTFI awards annual monitoring follows similar procedures. Module reports are prepared on all modules using a standard template. Reports are discussed at the College's Curriculum Panel and a summary report is provided to the Council for Training in Ministry. Staff are made aware of PTFI monitoring and review processes at induction. However, the review team noted that although the staff are well informed about PTFI processes, these are not formally documented. The recommendation that the College formally document and disseminate the procedures used for the monitoring and review of PTFI programmes made under Expectation B1 is also relevant here.

2.75 PTFI does not have a process of cyclical periodic review. Review is currently taking place of the requirements for the professional training of ministerial students through an Effective Ministry Task Group set up by the Church. The General Assembly of the PCI commissioned a review of the College in 2009, which made recommendations for organisational change and also set out the required areas of study for ministerial students.

2.76 Monitoring and review of both University and PTFI provision leads to the formulation of action plans that feed into the College's Quality Assurance Action Plan. The Quality Assurance Action Team is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the College's Quality Assurance Action Plan.

2.77 The College, in conjunction with its awarding partners, operates effective processes for the monitoring and review of its provision and manages its responsibilities appropriately. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B9): Higher education providers have procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of learning opportunities; these procedures are fair, accessible and timely, and enable enhancement.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints**

**Findings**

2.78 The College's responsibilities for handling complaints and appeals vary according to the awarding partner. The process for dealing with complaints and appeals raised by students who are registered on University undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes is outlined in the Memorandum of Agreement. Undergraduate academic appeals are considered by the IOT in the first instance and may then be carried forward to the University's Central Student Appeals Committee. Academic appeals by postgraduate research students are dealt with in the same manner but they are referred to the Central Student Research Appeals Committee. Complaints are handled under a separate but similar procedure. In both cases the IOT requires that students at constituent colleges initiate the process by writing to their college Principal, following which their appeal or complaint is handled in accordance with the appropriate University regulations. Details of the relevant procedures are available from the IOT office and there is a link on the IOT website to the comprehensive guidance available on the University's academic affairs website.

2.79 The College has sole responsibility for handling complaints and academic appeals by PTFI students and it also has jurisdiction over all students on disciplinary matters. The relevant processes are set out in the College handbook and a copy is provided for all students when they begin their studies.

2.80 If students believe that they have been unfairly treated or that due process has not been observed in the consideration of their complaint or appeal they have the right of resort to the Northern Ireland Ombudsman after College or University processes have been exhausted. The College's procedures and adherence to the arrangements of its awarding partner would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.81 The review team examined the effectiveness of the arrangements by scrutinising documentation including the Memorandum of Agreement, the IOT and College handbooks, the University and IOT websites, and the University VLE. The review team also held meetings with senior, academic and professional support staff, students, and awarding partner representatives.

2.82 There have been no formal complaints or appeals by College students in recent years and no documentation for the College or the University to monitor and review. College staff are accessible to students on a daily basis at the popular morning coffee sessions, and problems or grievances are discussed and resolved at an informal level. Students are aware that formal processes are available and that they could find detailed information in the College handbook and on the University website. Students confirm that they would be more likely to discuss any concerns with their tutors or the Principal.

2.83 The College and the University both have robust complaints and appeals procedures in place, and students know where to find the information if they need it. Informal opportunities are available to enable students to resolve their concerns at an early stage and support is available. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B10): Degree-awarding bodies take ultimate responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, irrespective of where these are delivered or who provides them. Arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body are implemented securely and managed effectively.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others**

**Findings**

2.84 Responsibility for work placement arrangements for PTFI ministry students is shared between the College and the PCI's Council for Training in Ministry on behalf of the General Assembly of the PCI. Work placements are not a requirement for students studying for University awards.

2.85 To gain vocational experience and training, students preparing for ordained ministry are required to undertake a sequence of congregational placements and student assistantships in local churches while engaged with the teaching delivered at the College. Placements are planned to provide students with an insight into the role of a minister and to increase the breadth and depth of their experience. Placements are arranged by PCI's Assignments Panel in agreement with local ministers and congregations. The College's Professor of Practical Theology and the Dean of Ministerial Studies and Development are Panel members. Procedures and guidelines are in place to inform students and ministry supervisors of their respective responsibilities. These arrangements would enable the College to meet the Expectation.

2.86 The review team scrutinised the College's arrangements for implementing and managing work-based learning opportunities by reviewing documentary evidence including handbooks, annual reports for the PCI's Board of Christian Training, the College's Youth Ministry guidelines, and the minutes of the Effective Contemporary Ministry Task Group. Meetings were held with senior and teaching staff, students on ministry pathways, and church leaders responsible for ministerial training within the PCI.

2.87 The review team found that arrangements work well in practice. The College's close relationship with the Church enables students to be placed in positions that support their learning. Working with the PCI's Assignments Panel, the College aims to develop the knowledge and practice of each student by arranging their placement in a congregation where the situation they experience will be different to that with which they are familiar. College staff liaise with the PCI to ensure that supervising ministers are briefed and guided to enable them to fully understand the requirements of the student's learning programme. The respective roles and responsibilities of students and supervising ministers are detailed in the College's handbook for supervising ministers.

2.88 The Principal and the Dean of Ministerial Studies and Development meet with each ministry student at the end of the academic year to review their progress towards the PCI requirements for licensing, and to talk about their placements and assistantships. Areas for development are identified and a placement arranged with the intention of enhancing each student's skills and employability. The roles and responsibilities of students are detailed in the College's Student Assistants Handbook. During placements students are supported by their supervising minister, and the Dean of Ministerial Studies and Development liaises with each minister and student. Students' development of preaching, pastoral and leadership skills are monitored by the Dean through personal observation, the reports received from supervising ministers, and assessment by members of faculty who are experienced practitioners. Students are prompted to reflect upon the placement in respect of vocation and their readiness for ministry. Following completion of each placement evaluation forms

from both parties are received by the Dean. No formal assessment is devolved to congregations or supervising ministers. The highly productive relationship between the College and the Church, which supports the learning opportunities and the aspirations of individual ministry students, is **good practice**.

2.89 The review team heard from PTFI students, at different stages of their studies, who expressed their satisfaction with arrangements made for the ministerial learning engagements and were enthusiastic about the level of individual support that they receive. Student progression and achievement rates are high. These arrangements, which are tailored to individual students, reflect the College's culture of supporting students and the meticulous care taken to foster personal growth and academic attainment (see good practice under Expectation B4).

2.90 The College has effective procedures in place to manage placement learning. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B11): Research degrees are awarded in a research environment that provides secure academic standards for doing research and learning about research approaches, methods, procedures and protocols. This environment offers students quality of opportunities and the support they need to achieve successful academic, personal and professional outcomes from their research degrees.**

### **Quality Code, *Chapter B11: Research Degrees***

#### **Findings**

2.91 The College provides supervision for research degrees within each of the theological disciplines. Research students are registered students both of the College and the University, and are subject to the University's comprehensive procedures regarding admission, supervision, progression and examination, which guarantee secure academic standards. These are laid out in the University's General Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes.

2.92 The admission process is clear and straightforward. Prospective candidates can find an overview of the procedure on the IOT website; further information, including a link to the online application form, is available on the main University website.

2.93 On enrolment, students are provided with a copy of the IOT's postgraduate handbook containing general information about the structure of the research degree and links to the more detailed guidance available in the University's General Regulations and its Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes. Together with the academic and pastoral guidance provided by their supervisors and the professional development opportunities offered by the University these policies and practices would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.94 To examine the effectiveness of the arrangements in place in relation to research degrees, the review team scrutinised a wide range of documentation, including handbooks, regulations, minutes of meetings, periodic review reports and action plans. The review team also held meetings with staff who act as supervisors, and with a full-time College-based research student.

2.95 Overall, the arrangements work effectively. Following enrolment research students have access to a comprehensive induction programme offered by the Graduate School. Further training and development activities are available through the University's Postgraduate Researcher Development Programme. Full-time research students are expected to undertake 30 days of training and development activities during the course of their studies.

2.96 On first enrolment all research students are undifferentiated. They are not registered as PhD students until they successfully complete a formal differentiation interview with a panel of academic staff, which assesses a substantial piece of written work and a forward research plan submitted by the candidate.

2.97 All supervisors are required to meet the standards laid down in the University's Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and new supervisors attend a one-day training course delivered by the Graduate School. College staff who provide supervision are all research active and are supported in their research activity by the College's Sabbatical Leave Policy.

2.98 University regulations stipulate that there shall be at least six formal meetings per year between research students and their supervisor(s). Students also undergo an annual progress review conducted by a panel convened by the Graduate School for that purpose. The IOT's 2014-15 annual review of research degree programmes highlights the effective use of progress reviews in identifying problems at an early stage.

2.99 The research student the review team met felt well supported and fully integrated into the wider learning communities in the College and the University. Support in obtaining library resources and access to the newly opened Graduate Building at the University were particularly valued.

2.100 Postgraduate research students in Theology are highly satisfied with their experience other than in the area of research culture. The College and the IOT are exploring ways of enhancing that experience and are encouraging use of the IOT's Religious Studies Research Forum as a venue for research students from different theological disciplines to discuss and learn together.

2.101 The College provides, in conjunction with its awarding body, a research environment that secures academic standards for research and learning about research approaches, methods, procedures and protocols. The environment offers students the quality of opportunities and support they need to achieve successful outcomes from their research degrees. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: 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. All of the 11 applicable Expectations are met and the associated level of risk is low.

2.103 The review team repeats the recommendation from Section 1 of this report, which relates to the following: formally document and disseminate the procedures used for the approval, amendment, monitoring and review of PTFI programmes (Expectations B1 and B8).

2.104 The review team makes one affirmation in this section, which relates to the steps being taken to provide training for student representatives on University and College committees (Expectation B5).

2.105 There are four features of good practice in this judgement area, which concern the culture of supporting students and the meticulous care taken to foster personal growth and academic attainment (Expectations B4 and B10); the strong sense of community and trust between students and staff, which enhances student engagement (Expectations B5 and Enhancement); the effective process for the early identification of individual students' needs for improved writing skills and the provision of appropriate academic support (Expectations B4 and B6); and the highly productive relationship between the College and the Church, which supports the learning opportunities and the aspirations of individual ministry students (Expectation B10).

2.106 The review team is confident that the College proposes to rectify the matters relating to these recommendations. The College is fully aware of its responsibilities for the quality of learning opportunities.

2.107 The review team concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities at the College **meets** UK expectations.

### **3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities**

**Expectation (C): UK higher education providers produce information for their intended audiences about the higher education they offer that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.**

#### **Quality Code, Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision**

##### **Findings**

3.1 The College publishes a range of information for stakeholders. The website, prospectus and handbook provide an overview of the institution, its mission and values, and its programmes of study. The College also publishes a hard copy prospectus for prospective students and for distribution at schools' career conventions and University open days.

3.2 For PTFI awards responsibility for published information lies with the College. For all College marketing materials referring to the University, and all University materials referring to the College, the approval of both partners is required. This reciprocal arrangement specifically includes student handbooks. Each respective awarding partner is responsible for maintaining student records, issuing student transcripts and awarding certificates. Overall, these arrangements would allow the Expectation to be met.

3.3 The review team tested the effectiveness of the arrangements by examining a range of documentation including the College prospectus, student handbooks, programme specifications and module descriptions. The team viewed the College website and the University VLE. The team also held meetings with senior, teaching and professional support staff, students, and awarding partner representatives.

3.4 The arrangements are effective in practice. Responsibility for the maintenance and updating of the information on the website is clearly allocated and undertaken as required during the year. All changes to information are routed through the Bursar, who has overall responsibility for website management and publications. A comprehensive audit takes place at the College during the summer to ensure that information is accurate, up to date and that it fully reflects current University practice and requirements. Student handbooks are submitted to the IOT for checking, and website content reviewed and updated as necessary.

3.5 The recently redesigned College website is specifically praised by students for its accuracy, friendliness and ease of use. The College has also received positive feedback from the University. A clear and comprehensive overview of the College is provided, as is useful information on the different fee regimes for students in Northern Ireland, the EU and the UK. Information is helpfully contextualised according to whether prospective students are seeking to study Theology as an academic subject or wishing to undertake ministerial training leading to ordination in the PCI. Prospective ministerial students are provided with contact details for the Dean of Ministerial Studies and Development, who will provide information and advice on the application and selection process.

3.6 For University awards programme specifications and module descriptions are published in the IOT handbook and on the University website. The University VLE is a key vehicle for the delivery of information, timetables, reading lists, and teaching materials for students registered for University awards. It is also used for the submission of assignments and the receipt of feedback. PTFI students who are not also enrolled with the University receive their information and teaching materials by email. This interim arrangement is new.



The College are seeking alternative arrangements to replace the separate browser-based document management system used for PTFI students until very recently.

3.7 Students confirm that the information provided to them pre-entry was accessible and trustworthy. Students enrolled on University awards find the information on the University website and VLE to be accurate and informative, and report that they have easy access to external examiners' reports for their modules.

3.8 Programme specifications and module descriptions for PTFI modules and qualifications are published in the College handbook. However, the procedures for the formal approval, amendment, monitoring and review of these programmes are not formally documented. The recommendation made under Expectation B1 also applies here.

3.9 The College has effective procedures to ensure that the information it provides is comprehensive, accurate and accessible. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The quality of the information about learning opportunities: Summary of findings

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

3.11 The Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low. The review team repeats the recommendation made in Section 2 of this report. No features of good practice are identified and there are no affirmations in this area.

3.12 The review team concludes that the quality of the information about learning opportunities at the College **meets** UK expectations.

## 4 Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities

**Expectation (Enhancement): Deliberate steps are being taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities.**

### Findings

4.1 The College's mission statement has recently been revised to provide a greater emphasis on diversity, outward-looking perspectives, and a wider range of teaching and research activities. This reflects the changing environment in which the College operates, and the strategic imperatives of its awarding partners. The mission informs the College's approach to enhancement through the work of its committees, staff development, student involvement, quality assurance systems, and the College's action plan.

4.2 The General Assembly of the PCI provides strategic direction to the College through its Council for Training in Ministry. Strategic planning is undertaken for the Church as a whole, and includes the training of ministers by the College. Currently, the Church's Ministerial Studies and Development Committee, and an Effective Ministry Task Group, are engaged in discussion of the training needs of future ministers, with a view to enhancing the practical and professional dimensions of PTFI provision at the College to meet the demands of a changing Church.

4.3 Strategic direction is also provided to the College by the University through its Vision 2020 Strategy and plans to increase research activity, postgraduate student numbers and recruitment of international students. The outcome of a recent University strategic review of theology provision in light of Vision 2020 is currently awaited: the recommendations of the review will provide further strategic direction to the College through its position within the IOT. These arrangements would enable the Expectation to be met.

4.4 The review team evaluated the effectiveness of the College's arrangements by examining documentary evidence including handbooks, policies, reports, committee terms of reference and minutes, action plans, external examiners reports, documents associated with annual monitoring, and student feedback. The team also held meetings with senior, teaching and professional support staff, students, officers of the PCI, and awarding partner representatives.

4.5 The review team found that the College has structures and processes in place that are designed to promote the enhancement of students' learning opportunities. The College has a committed Christian ethos that emphasises learning and personal growth. This supports a very strong sense of community among staff and students, which enhances the students' learning experience. Regular and frequent opportunities for informal interaction between staff and students include worship and fellowship activities that are open to all and a daily morning coffee break. Students describe the College as inclusive, with a good sense of community. The increasingly interactive style of teaching and increased tutorial support also contribute to increasing engagement between staff and students. Such activities reflect a culture of student-centeredness and underpin the trust between students and staff, which enhances student engagement. This aspect of College life is identified as a feature of good practice under Expectation B5.

4.6 The College's Quality Assurance Action Plan is updated annually. The Plan has recently been strengthened by the addition of target dates and responsibilities for actions. The College's Quality Assurance Action Team, chaired by the Principal, includes professional and academic staff, and two student representatives who provide overlapping membership with the General Student Council and the Ministerial Student Council.

The terms of reference of the Quality Assurance Action Team include updating and overseeing the implementation of the Quality Assurance Action Plan and supporting quality assurance activity across the College. The recent addition of a quality assurance item at the end of College committees helps members to identify and reflect on the contribution to enhancement of discussions and decisions. Matters identified include enhancing student employability; increasing digital literacy; developing the holistic nature of the student experience; new methods of assessment; module review; faculty development and intensive teaching. This recent initiative increases awareness of the positive role of quality assurance.

4.7 The College is strongly committed to continuous improvement and to acting effectively on feedback. Priorities for enhancing the student learning experience are developed with reference to staff and student feedback and external feedback including previous QAA reviews, external examiners' reports, and the recent University periodic review of the IOT. Information collected includes annual monitoring, module level review, student surveys, peer observation, student engagement with staff-student bodies and other committees, and stakeholder engagement, in particular with the PCI. Analysis leading to recommendations for action occurs at different levels. The review team noted discussion and decisions promoting the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College in the minutes of University, College and Church committees.

4.8 Current priorities for enhancement include improved feedback to students, improving student writing skills and new modes of module delivery. The review team was made aware of a number of recent enhancement initiatives taken by the College. These included innovative approaches to assessment, new delivery patterns for some modules and improvements to timetabling. Plans are in place for further upgrading of the information technology infrastructure. Other examples of the continuous improvement of the quality of learning opportunities are discussed under Expectations B3, B4, B5, B6 and B10.

4.9 Students cite examples of actions taken by the College to enhance the quality of learning opportunities. These include addressing the problems students identified in relation to information technology, and adjusting the delivery and assessment of specific modules to meet student needs. Students are involved in enhancement decisions through their feedback to the College, the University and their representation on key committees.

4.10 Staff highlight the value of peer observation undertaken on a cross-disciplinary basis for teaching development as well as the variety of formal and informal opportunities to share good practice. University subject boards provide a forum for cross-College exchange of ideas. External examiners for University provision identify good practice. The University's annual programme review also lists identified good practice. Commendable practice of value to other modules is identified in PTFI module reviews.

4.11 The review team concludes that the College takes deliberate and effective steps to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.12 In reaching its judgement about the enhancement of student learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

4.13 The Expectation in this area is met and the associated level of risk is low.

4.14 The review team makes no recommendations in this area and there are no affirmations. An area of good practice identified in Section 2 of this report also applies to this judgement area.

4.15 The review team concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College **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 on pages 21-24 of the [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\) handbook](#).

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality: [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality).

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **Glossary** on the QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/GlossaryEN.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/GlossaryEN.aspx).

### 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**).

### 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

### **Enhancement**

The process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported. It is used as a technical term in our review processes.

### **Expectations**

Statements in the **Quality Code** that set out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

### **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** that all 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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