



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

May 2019

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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 20 to 22 May 2019 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Miss Nina Di Cara
- Mrs Amanda Donaldson
- Dr Stephen Hill.

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provision and to make judgements as to whether or not academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These expectations 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.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#)<sup>2</sup> and 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](http://www.qaa.ac.uk).

<sup>3</sup> Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers): [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/higher-education-review](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/higher-education-review)

## Key findings

### Judgements

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

- The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisations **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 feature of **good practice**.

- The meticulous and supportive approach to pastoral care for all students, and their integration in a wide range of community activities, which strongly support students' personal and professional development (Expectation B4).

### Recommendations

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

By September 2019:

- ensure that the lines of reporting in the governance structure are aligned with responsibilities for academic authority (Expectation A2.1)
- ensure that the approval of new programmes includes scrutiny by independent external academic expertise (Expectations A3.1, A3.4 and B1)
- ensure that the process for approval of new programmes and of changes to programmes is consistently applied (Expectation B1)
- establish, implement and ensure staff and student awareness of processes for the prevention, detection and consequences of academic misconduct (Expectation B6)
- establish and implement effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and review of programmes (Expectations B8, B7 and A3.2)
- establish, implement and effectively manage secure arrangements for the delivery of learning opportunities in student placements (Expectation B10)
- take steps to fully embed the strategy for enhancement in the College's planning processes (Enhancement).

By January 2020:

- establish and systematically implement the learning and teaching strategy in respect of programmes taught in the College (Expectation B3).

By June 2020:

- ensure that the appointment of full-time academic staff takes account of the diversity and needs of all students in order that individual students are able to

develop and achieve their academic, personal and professional potential (Expectation B4).

### **Affirmation of action being taken**

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

- The steps being taken to formalise and implement the process for consideration of and responding to external examiners' reports (Expectation B7).

## About the provider

The Union Theological College (the College) specialises in the provision of theological education. While its primary focus is the training of men and women for the ordained ministry of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI), it affirms that it welcomes students from all backgrounds and perspectives to study Christian theology in a community of faith and scholarship. The College is committed to preparing students to make effective and positive contributions to society and across the world, to equipping students for effective ministry in the PCI, and to providing research-informed teaching and innovative approaches to learning and assessment.

The College, in partnership with Queen's University Belfast (the University), delivers programmes leading to the award of undergraduate, taught postgraduate and research degrees in theology by the University. In addition, the College offers postgraduate provision leading to the award of degrees by the Presbyterian Theological Faculty, Ireland (PTFI) under the terms of the PTFI's Royal Charter. At the time of the review, there were 160 students studying at the College, of whom 142 were enrolled on eight programmes of the University and 18 on five PTFI programmes. The College has nine full-time members of teaching staff and 20 part-time staff.

In 2018, following a review of its relationship with the College, the University decided to suspend admission to its undergraduate programmes delivered by the College. As a result, the College is now addressing the challenge of considering the future of its provision in the light of a changing relationship with the University. Other challenges being considered by the College include its response to changing profiles of ministry students and their ability to engage with contemporary concerns, and its ambition to develop programmes in theology for online delivery.

The College's most recent engagement with QAA was a monitoring visit for educational oversight in October 2018, which resulted in a judgement that the College was making progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision but that further improvement is required. Since then, the College has considered the shortcomings identified in the report of the monitoring visit, and its strategy for addressing them is contained in an action plan prepared in December 2018.

## Explanation of findings

This section explains the review findings in greater detail.

### **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 a constituent member college of the University's Institute of Theology (IOT) which provides undergraduate and postgraduate theological education. In addition, the College delivers postgraduate programmes leading to awards of the Presbyterian Theological Faculty, Ireland (PTFI). The College follows and engages with quality assurance procedures from its respective awarding bodies, but responsibility for ensuring academic quality and standards ultimately lies with its awarding bodies.

1.2 The PTFI, comprising the College's full-time professors, has documentation setting out the process by which its qualifications should be designed, modified and approved in accordance with threshold academic standards. For the University's awards, the College works to engage with the University's quality processes through the frameworks operated by the IOT. These arrangements, if securely implemented, would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.3 The review team tested the Expectation by reviewing partnership documents, policy, relevant meeting minutes, programme and module records, as well as in discussion with staff.

1.4 Developments to the College's programme design and review procedure allow for UK threshold academic standards to be duly considered in the design process. For both University and PTFI programmes, the appropriate involvement of external examiners supports the ongoing quality of awards. Information such as programme and module descriptors demonstrates how programmes are aligned to UK threshold standards.

1.5 The College participates in and supports the annual and periodic review of University programmes within the University's quality assurance mechanism, which ensures that awards of the University adhere to UK standards. The College has worked collaboratively with the University to develop the BA in Theology within the University's structures.

1.6 For PTFI awards, the implementation of the recently adopted Programme Design and Approval policy is intended to ensure that the development of new programmes, and modifications to current programmes are aligned with threshold academic standards, and that all programmes will be aligned with FHEQ. This has been demonstrated, for instance, in the development of the new Master of Divinity programme. Although the College's module specification template does not contain an explicit requirement to show how threshold standards are being met, this requirement is included in programme specification templates.

1.7 The College works effectively with its awarding bodies in discharging its responsibilities for securing threshold academic standards. 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**

1.8 The College is required to work within the frameworks set out by its awarding bodies that govern the award of academic credit and qualifications. Within the IOT and the College itself there are a series of committees and groups responsible for maintaining academic standards that form a network of oversight for academic standards of the University's awards.

1.9 For programmes leading to a PTFI award, processes are largely designed to mirror those of the University, with the Faculty responsible for oversight of the College's quality assurance processes and for recommending the award of academic credit and qualifications to the PTFI. These arrangements, if securely implemented, would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.10 The review team examined the terms of reference for the committee structure of the College, relevant policies, minutes of meetings of the Faculty and of the PTFI, and met members of staff.

1.11 Arrangements for managing University programmes are secure and are overseen through the Management Body of the IOT, which contains staff from the IOT as well as senior members of the University.

1.12 For PTFI awards, the Faculty has oversight of academic standards within the College. However, the review team found that the lines of accountability and responsibility for academic authority in the College's documented governance structure contain contradictions within terms of reference and with the reported organisational structure. For instance, although the Faculty is responsible for the internal government of the College and for all matters relating to academic standards, its terms of reference state that it receives no reports from other committees but that it reports to the Management Committee and the Curriculum Panel; there is no reference in the terms of reference of the Management Committee or the Curriculum Panel to the appointment of external examiners despite this being part of their function according to the Externality Policy. There are inconsistencies between working practices described by staff and the documentation, for instance regarding whether the Faculty or Management Committee is the academic authority in the College. In order to ensure that the College's academic frameworks are sufficiently transparent and comprehensive, the review team **recommends** that the College ensures that the lines of reporting in the governance structure are aligned with responsibilities for academic authority.

1.13 Inconsistencies in accountability for academic authority within the College, in relation to PTFI programmes, constitute a weakness in the governance structure that reflects a lack of clarity about responsibilities. Nevertheless, this weakness is confined to a small part of the College's provision, and, despite this, working practices are sound. The Expectation is met and the level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**



**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 The responsibility for maintaining the definitive records of programmes and qualifications delivered by the College rests with its awarding partners, the University and the PTFI.

1.15 University programmes delivered 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 IOT. The University's Student Registry Service is responsible for maintaining student records, providing academic transcripts and issuing degree certificates.

1.16 Programmes delivered on behalf of PTFI are designed to meet the needs of students preparing for ministerial roles within the PCI. The definitive records for these programmes and qualifications are published in the College handbook.

1.17 These arrangements, if securely implemented, would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.18 The review team considered 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's virtual learning environment (VLE). The team met senior staff, academic staff and students of the College, as well as a PCI minister responsible for supervising placement students.

1.19 The evidence examined demonstrates the arrangements to be effective. 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.

1.20 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 are the main reference point for delivery of the awards. The Expectation is met and the 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 The College follows the policies and procedures of its awarding body for the approval of programmes awarded by the University. For the College's own awards, it has developed a Programme Design and Review Policy, which outlines factors to be considered when developing a new module or programme, including checking appropriate FHEQ levels, alignment with the College mission and values, academic coherence and availability of resources. These arrangements, if securely implemented, would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.22 The review team explored how the College meets the Expectation in practice by examining the College's policy and procedures related to programme approval, programme specifications, templates for programme and module approval, documentation related to programme approval and by meeting with staff and students.

1.23 The College follows robust processes for the development and approval of new programmes for its partner university. The approval of new university programmes is undertaken by the University, with input from the College and includes external consultation and consideration of academic standards. For example, a new undergraduate BA in Theology was approved for delivery from September 2018 and the College met the University's expectations in relation to its development and approval.

1.24 The process for the approval of PTFI programmes is described in the new Programme Design and Review Policy, which clearly outlines the criteria used at each stage of the approval process by the relevant committees and provides a clear framework for effective planning and decision-making, with due consideration given to academic standards. The College acknowledges that this is a recently-developed policy and that it has not yet been fully embedded within its processes for a full cycle; there is therefore no evidence of its implementation in practice.

1.25 Although the policy requires the use of external expertise in the development of programmes, the approval itself is granted by the Faculty, which consists of the senior academics of the College. There is therefore the potential that programmes are approved only by the same people involved in their development and delivery, without secure oversight by independent academic expertise at the approval stage. This weakness in part of the College's academic governance presents a risk to the rigour with which new programmes are independently scrutinised for approval in order to ensure that academic standards are set at a level that meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification and are in accordance with the College's own academic frameworks and regulations. The review team **recommends** that the College ensures that the approval of new programmes includes scrutiny by independent external academic expertise.

1.26 While a process of curriculum mapping is used to ensure that for some programmes the intended learning outcomes are delivered and assessed, this practice is not consistent across all programmes and is not explicit within assessment briefs given to students, as discussed in Expectation A3.2.

1.27 The College operates clear and suitable processes for the approval of programmes, but the absence of external scrutiny at programme approval is indicative of insufficient emphasis given to assuring standards in the College's planning processes. The Expectation is met and the level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**

**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 Programmes awarded by the University are governed by the University's General Regulations Calendar, which sets out the framework for the delivery, assessment and award of academic credit and qualifications. The University has oversight of all such awards of credit and/or qualifications through its examination boards. For PTFI awards, the overall assessment regulations are expressed as a strategy, which is set out in the Assessment Policy, and recommendations for awards of credit and/or qualifications are the responsibility of the Faculty, as set out in its terms of reference. These arrangements, if securely implemented, would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.29 To test the effectiveness of these frameworks, the review team examined the University's Academic Regulations, the College's Assessment Policy, programme and module specifications, minutes of University examination boards and internal Faculty meetings, external examiner feedback, and met staff and students.

1.30 Both sets of regulations set out clear and unambiguous frameworks to ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only when learning outcomes have been assessed.

1.31 Learning outcomes are specified at programme and module level and agreed at the time of approval, reapproval or modification by either the University or the PTFI. Although there is some effective mapping of the learning outcomes to modules and assessment criteria, the College does not take the opportunity to develop students' academic literacy by making this mapping available to students.

1.32 Assessment at module level is used effectively to give students the opportunity to demonstrate achievement of the module learning outcomes. For new programmes, learning outcomes are mapped at approval across modules, and module intended learning outcomes are mapped to individual assessments, thus providing robust evidence that module and programme learning outcomes have been achieved through assessment. The College intends to ensure that all existing programmes align in a similar way through the annual monitoring and review processes. While programmes leading to awards of the University undergo periodic review under the University's processes, the absence of a current internal process for periodic review leads to a risk that learning outcomes for existing programmes may not have the same level of alignment across the whole programme and its assessments; this weakness contributes to the recommendation in Expectation B8.

1.33 The College's arrangements for the assessment of learning outcomes ensure that UK threshold standards and the standards of its awarding partners are satisfied. Progression and awards decisions are made appropriately by the University for its provision,

and by the College's Faculty for PTFI awards. The absence of secure alignment of module learning outcomes with individual assessments represents a minor omission. The Expectation is met, and the 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**

1.34 The University is responsible for the annual monitoring and periodic review of its programmes delivered by the College. The College engages with the University's monitoring processes and the resultant Continuous Action for Programme Enhancement report is produced by the University and approved through its committee structure. For PTFI awards, a process for annual monitoring was written in the course of the year 2018-19, but is not yet fully embedded in practice. This process will ensure that module-level reviews by students and module convenors, Faculty evaluations, external examiner comments, self-evaluation documents and reports/comments from internal committees will all feed into an Annual Review Process. The College's Curriculum Panel has recommended that periodic review be scheduled to take place every three years for PTFI programmes. These arrangements, if securely implemented, would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.35 The review team tested the effectiveness of the College's processes by examining the procedures for programme monitoring and review; module reviews, annual reports; minutes of departmental meetings and the curriculum panel where monitoring is discussed; and by meeting with staff and students.

1.36 The programmes awarded by the University are monitored through the Continuous Action for Programme Enhancement process, whereby student achievement and feedback and external examiner comments are reported and action planned. The teach-out plan for the University's programmes delivered in the College includes provision for the continuing monitoring of this provision during the period of withdrawal of these programmes.

1.37 The College's policy for monitoring and review of PTFI programmes, discussed in more detail in Expectation B8, has the potential to provide a robust framework for ensuring that delivery of its programmes is congruent with what was approved, and that academic currency is maintained.

1.38 The process and timeline for periodic review of PTFI awards is outlined in the Programme Design and Review Policy. The College recognises that this aspect of its monitoring has not been fully implemented in the past and the new policy will therefore ensure that it is given due consideration. No periodic review of PTFI programmes has formally taken place since 2009 and the next one is not scheduled until 2021. This demonstrates an insufficient emphasis given to assuring standards and quality in the previous planning processes, although the new policy should address these concerns.

1.39 The College relies on the University's processes for the monitoring and review of the University's awards. The College's processes for monitoring and reviewing programmes are likely to strengthen its oversight of the standards of PTFI awards. The Expectation is met. However, these processes are not yet fully implemented, and the College has not

conducted a periodic review of these programmes since 2009. These weaknesses indicate insufficient emphasis to assuring standards in the College's planning processes. The level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**

**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**

1.40 The University fulfils its responsibility for externality in setting academic standards in its programmes by ensuring adequate use of external expertise in the development and approval of its programmes, as well as by the appointment of external examiners to programmes delivered by the College.

1.41 For PTFI programmes an Externality Policy has been produced, which specifies the nature of the involvement of external examiners at the College, with the Programme Design and Review Policy stipulating the points in this process at which external bodies should be consulted. These arrangements, if securely implemented, would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.42 The review team examined policy documents, minutes of committee meetings, reports from external examiners, records of consultations with external bodies, and held meetings with staff.

1.43 The use of external consultation is documented in the Programme Design and Review Policy and makes appropriate use of external examiners throughout the life-course of the programmes.

1.44 While the Externality Policy only refers to external examining, in practice the College has also made use of its connections with other organisations to strengthen independent and external consultation during the design of new programmes. Additionally, for PTFI programmes there is input from the PCI through the Management Committee, which provides external views from the perspective of the church as a future employer of PTFI ministry students, and through two members of the Curriculum Panel who are external to PTFI.

1.45 The College does not make use of external expertise at the point of programme approval, a weakness which is exacerbated by the fact that the members of the PTFI (which approves recommendations for approval of new programmes) are also members of Faculty (which makes such recommendations). This weakness contributes to the recommendation in Expectation A3.1. However, as the PCI is represented on the Management Committee there are opportunities for its views to inform programme development during the design process.

1.46 The College adequately fulfils its responsibilities for the use of independent external expertise. The Expectation is met, with the associated risk being 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 Expectations in this judgement area are met with a low level of risk except for Expectations A2.1, A3.1 and A3.3 which are met with a moderate level of risk.

1.48 The two recommendations in this judgement area arise from the need to ensure that the College's governance structure is aligned with responsibilities for academic authority and to ensure independent external scrutiny of the approval of new programmes.

1.49 There are no features of good practice or affirmations in this judgement area.

1.50 The College has secure frameworks to ensure that standards are maintained at appropriate levels and that the definitive record of each programme is used to govern the award of academic credit and qualifications.

1.51 The review team concludes that the maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and/or other awarding organisations at the provider **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 follows the University's policies and procedures for the design, development and approval of programmes leading to awards of the University. For PTFI awards, the College has established a Programme Design and Review Policy, which stipulates approval criteria and processes to be followed and includes the requirement for consultation with students, employers and external academics during the design and development phase. There is currently no requirement within the policy for independent academic involvement in the approval of new PTFI programmes. Internal approval rests with the Faculty as the academic authority within the College, as set out in its terms of reference. Adherence to the University's processes and the development of a robust internal policy would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.2 The review team explored how the College meets the Expectation in practice by considering the University's policies and procedures, as available on its website, the College's Programme Design and Review Policy, documentation relating to the development and approval of the Postgraduate Diploma/Master of Theology and the Master of Divinity, case studies related to minor and major changes to programmes and through discussions with staff and students.

2.3 The development and approval of University programmes follows the processes set out online on the University's website. This process is led by the University with contributions sought and received from the College.

2.4 Development and approval of PTFI programmes and changes to them is conducted within the framework of the new Programme Design and Review Policy. This requires consultation with external academics and experts, students and employers during the development phase only. The development and approval of the Master of Theology and Master of Divinity programmes followed this policy, with consultation taking place with PCI leaders and with students. Final approval was given by the PTFI, following recommendation from the Faculty. However, as noted in Expectation A3.1, the absence of formal involvement of external independent academics in the approval itself represents a risk to the rigour of these processes because decisions regarding approval may not be taken independently of those involved in the design and delivery of the programme. This weakness contributes to the recommendation in Expectation A3.1.

2.5 Minor modifications to programmes are approved at departmental level. Major changes follow a more formal process and require consultation with students and approval by Faculty. However, a change to the assessment profile of the Graduate Certificate/Diploma in Youth Ministry in February 2019 did not follow the College's own policy and the changes were made without student consultation and without Faculty approval. The review team **recommends** that the College ensures that the process for approval of new programmes and of changes to programmes is consistently applied.

2.6 The College's policy for the design, development and approval of programmes is robust, but is not yet fully embedded in practice. The failure to apply it securely to the change in the assessment profile of the Graduate Certificate/Diploma in Youth Ministry is indicative of a shortcoming in the rigour with which the policy is applied. The Expectation is met, and the level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**

**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**

2.7 The College has no responsibility for the selection and admission of students for University programmes awards, this being carried out by the University's Admissions and Access Service. The relevant policies and procedures are published on the University website and there are clear guidelines for complainants to follow, including information about complaints and appeals relating to admissions processes.

2.8 Students for the PTFI awards are selected and admitted by the College, through its Admissions Policy. While entry is on the basis of academic qualifications, applications are invited from candidates with non-standard entry qualifications. These arrangements, if securely implemented, would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.9 The review team reviewed relevant documentation, including the Admissions Policy, the Prior Learning Policy, policies for appeals against admissions decisions, and the College Handbook, and held meetings with relevant staff and students.

2.10 The selection of students for the ministry of the PCI is overseen by the Church's Council for Training in Ministry (CTM), which interviews applicants and reviews the selection procedures. While the CTM has established several interview panels charged with assessing the suitability of candidates for the ministry, these panels have no overlapping membership, and the process for planning the conduct of interviews and for ensuring consistency of decision-making was not clear.

2.11 Non-ministry applicants are encouraged to have an information interview to identify any particular needs and inform them about the application process. An admissions panel makes recommendations to the Faculty, which makes the final decision. Those applying for entry to PTFI awards have access to an Appeals and Complaints Procedure, with formal enquiries to the Principal and appeals to the College Management Committee.

2.12 The College's processes for recruitment, selection and admission are transparent, reliable and inclusive and are underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and procedures. 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**

2.13 The College is responsible for delivery of programmes and collaborates with its awarding bodies with respect to the development and enhancement of learning and teaching opportunities. Its Vision Statement is set out in the College Handbook and describes its ethos towards learning and teaching.

2.14 The College's current objectives around learning and teaching are set out in its Quality Assurance Action Plan, and include the use of ongoing module review processes, engagement in the University's annual monitoring and periodic review, consideration of student feedback and investment in staff development to enhance the learning experience for its students. These arrangements are overseen by the Curriculum Panel, Management Committee and Faculty. These arrangements, if securely implemented, would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.15 The review team examined documents relating to staff development and training, student reviews of teaching, meeting minutes, as well as student progression and attainment data. At the review visit the team met senior and adjunct teaching staff, students and professional support staff.

2.16 Reflective and effective teaching is enabled by processes in place for module review, and by peer-to-peer observations of teaching carried out by full-time staff, but not that carried out by part-time staff. Staff are able to take a semester-long sabbatical every five years to engage in intensive research or professional development. There is a record of staff training, conference attendance and membership of professional bodies, and support for professional development is negotiated by individual members of staff with the Principal at annual staff development reviews. Several members of staff have been supported to become Advance HE Fellows and to complete a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching and several members of staff are currently acting, or have previously acted, as external examiners for other programmes across the UK. Staff are also able to apply for teaching recognition from the University. These activities allow staff to deliver the research-informed teaching that the College aims to provide.

2.17 Students spoke positively about the quality of teaching they receive and noted in particular the ease with which they can access personalised academic support from staff, and the ways in which teaching is influenced by current staff research. In support of the College's vision to provide innovative approaches to learning, the review team heard that online students are very positive about the quality of teaching, with novel features of their VLE being used to deliver content.

2.18 The College approaches the development of learning and teaching through its QAA Action Plan, which is overseen by the Quality Action Team. Opportunities for improvements are identified through internal module review processes, through responses from the University to annual monitoring reports and through student involvement in the College's committee structure. While these processes lead to useful localised discussion of themes at department meetings and Good Practice Themed Meetings, there is no current strategic

plan for the development of learning and teaching, which creates a risk that opportunities for proactive developments are missed. Acknowledging the need to enhance the articulation and implementation of a strategic approach to learning and teaching, the College has begun to develop a learning and teaching strategy and has committed itself to completion by August 2019. The proposed change of name of the Curriculum Panel to the Teaching and Learning Committee is intended to support this development. The review team **recommends** that the provider establish and systematically implement the learning and teaching strategy in respect of programmes taught in the College.

2.19 The College's approach to learning and teaching offers satisfactory opportunities for students to study in depth and to develop their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking. However, the current absence of a strategic approach to the development of learning and teaching indicates insufficient emphasis given to assuring the quality of learning opportunities and teaching practices in the College's planning. The Expectation is met and the level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**

**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**

2.20 The College's learning resources are the responsibility of the Management Committee, and are considered at its subcommittee, the Finance, Property and Administration Panel. Matters relating to student support and disabled students are overseen by the Bursar, with students on University programmes additionally having access to the University's Student Support Services. Personal tutoring arrangements are stipulated in a Personal Tutor Handbook and there is a Student at Risk Policy to ensure timely support is offered to students. Students are made aware of these arrangements in the College Handbook. For students training for ordained ministry the Dean of Ministerial Students and Development is their first point of contact for support.

2.21 Resources are provided for students both in person and online. On-campus students can access the College's Gamble Library, which is supported by dedicated librarians, and which offers access to printing, copying and IT facilities. All students on PTFI programmes have access to the College's VLE, as well as to online journals and library resources. Students on University programmes have access to the University's VLE and to the University's library facilities.

2.22 The review team tested this Expectation by reviewing student data, committee meeting minutes, relevant handbooks, student feedback, and online systems. The review team also met online and campus-based students, full-time and adjunct teaching staff, and professional support staff.

2.23 For students entering programmes in 2016 and 2017, retention and completion rates vary between 84 per cent and 100 per cent, and are in excess of 90 per cent for almost all programmes. The College states that it has a 'holistic approach' to supporting student achievement, the size of the student body allowing students to be known by staff as individuals. Both students and staff described benefiting from daily coffee times where all students and staff are encouraged to attend and socialise. Students are also very positive about the peer mentoring scheme and about ease of access to staff to discuss pastoral or academic matters, including suggestions of improvements to modules.

2.24 The College expressed strong commitment to ensuring close and effective support for individual students. It has a variety of effective formal and informal systems for monitoring and supporting students' academic development and welfare. These provide support to students who may be at risk and enable formal reviews of progress through the personal tutoring system. The College's relationship with the PCI has enabled students with mental health difficulties to seek support from the PCI when it was not readily available elsewhere. Twice-weekly collective worship is an important part of the pastoral system for students. Students expressed positive views about the supportive learning environment and commended the College's commitment to engaging with the local community through relationships with congregations, charitable organisations and opportunities for students to visit and learn from places of worship of different faiths. The review team recognised as **good practice** the meticulous and supportive approach to pastoral care for all students, and their integration in a wide range of community activities, which strongly support students' personal and professional development.

2.25 The College has a policy for support of students with disabilities, who are advised to contact the Bursar-Registrar who acts as the Disability Contact. Students on University programmes may make use of the University's Disability Service.

2.26 Students' academic development is specifically supported by annual events such as induction, which all College students attend, as well as an annual 'module fair' which students can use to make informed choices about their module decisions. Throughout the year a traffic-light system for quality of academic writing is used to identify students who may need additional support; detailed style and writing guides are available to facilitate students' development. Students' academic and professional development is further enabled by vocational placements for ministry students, and by participation in the Erasmus scheme for University students, who have studied at institutions in the Netherlands and in Hungary.

2.27 Students and staff expressed positive views about the College's library facilities. The library service offers comprehensive and supportive facilities for accessing texts and advice from librarians, both online and in person. The Library Users Forum, whose composition includes students, allows users to suggest improvements to this service. Online resources are available to students through the VLE, which is used creatively to encourage student engagement with academic material, particularly for online programmes.

2.28 Recognising that the College's full-time teaching staff are all male, the College has acknowledged the desirability of making urgent progress to appoint female members of faculty staff. Teaching staff are appointed to the College by the PCI and are then inducted by the College. Although the College is not directly responsible for staff appointments, it affirms that the PCI accepts the need to take gender diversity into account in selecting and appointing new staff. Results of the College's student survey in 2018 suggest that students would like there to be female faculty staff, and discussion by Faculty in June 2018 indicated its awareness of the need to ensure that female students feel valued. The report of the University's review of the College's undergraduate provision in 2016 identified the lack of full-time female teaching staff as a cause for concern, referring to the presence of female teaching staff as a 'critically important feature of any academic subject'. This suggests that the lack of gender diversity in full-time teaching staff appointments has the potential to have an adverse impact on students' personal and professional development, through a lack of female role models for students. Some staff of the College have undertaken gender and diversity training offered by the University, but the level of uptake and effectiveness of this training was unclear. The review team **recommends** that the College should ensure that the appointment of full-time academic staff takes account of the diversity and needs of all students in order that individual students are able to develop and achieve their academic, personal and professional potential.

2.29 The College has effective systems for monitoring and promoting student development and achievement. The Expectation is met and the 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**

2.30 Student engagement at the College is both formal and informal. 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, which 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.

2.31 These arrangements, if securely implemented, would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.32 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, including a number of elected representatives, and held meetings with senior, teaching and professional support staff, and awarding partner representatives.

2.33 Student representatives on the College's Quality Assurance Action Team expressed positive views about the College's responses to issues raised by them, and to the measures to address them incorporated in its Quality Assurance Action Plans. The Student Submission drew attention in positive terms to the training of representatives carried out by the Principal. 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. On an informal level, the daily coffee break is actively promoted as an occasion for relaxed exchanges of views between students and staff.

2.34 Staff of the College affirmed that they pay close attention to student feedback, citing the College's response to student concerns about wi-fi access, printing services and the availability of key texts. The review team saw evidence that the College has consulted students in the design of new programmes, specifically the planned MTh in Theological Ethics and the MA in Christian Studies. Students confirmed their view that their feedback is taken seriously and acted upon by the College, for example in the provision of more study space and computers. The Quality Assurance Action Plan and Annual Programme Review 2015-16 contain references to 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. The 2018-19 Action Plan shows planned and actual improvements to provision, for example changes to the module in 'Study of World Religions'.

2.35 Surveys at the end of each module enable students to comment on their lecturers' approach to teaching, as well as on module content and delivery. In describing the response of the College and the IOT to this feedback, teaching staff cited a number of instances of changes to curriculum content and delivery including revisions to timetables and changes to

the scheduling of assessments. The results of the module surveys are made available to all students through the University's VLE and the College's notice boards.

2.36 Students attach a high value to the daily shared coffee break, which encourages engagement by providing the opportunity for relaxed exchanges of views with staff in an informal setting. Students expressed appreciation of the supportive collegial environment and the approachability and accessibility of all staff, including senior staff. The review team heard that students value highly the attention paid to individual student concerns and that they express a strong sense of partnership in the assurance and enhancement of their learning. Their representation on committees enables students to engage with the College's strategic development and its quality enhancement processes.

2.37 The College has effective systems for engaging students as partners in their educational experience, both formally and informally, including representation on suitable committees. 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**

2.38 The College has an Assessment Policy for PTFI awards, which sets out the purposes of assessment and feedback; the principles of assessment design and the quality assurance of assessment; and the procedures for developing and marking of assessments. University programmes are governed by the University's General and Study Regulations. Assessment is overseen by the external examiner. Awards and progression decisions for University programmes are taken by the University for their programmes, in accordance with their General Regulations. For PTFI awards, decisions are recommended by Faculty and then confirmed by the PTFI. The Recognition of Prior Learning Policy sets out the College's approach and procedures for awarding credit based on either certificated or experiential prior learning.

2.39 These arrangements, if securely implemented, would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.40 The review team examined programme and module specifications, academic regulations, minutes of examination boards, minutes of Faculty meetings, external examiners' communications and examples of tutor feedback. The team also discussed assessment with the senior and teaching staff and students.

2.41 Assessment practice has evolved effectively as a means of assessing intended learning outcomes and in the more recently developed programmes, learning outcomes are explicitly mapped to assessment criteria. This is not always the case for the more established programmes, but the College has plans to address this as programmes are reviewed. This issue is discussed further in Expectations A3.2 and B8.

2.42 Assessment briefs are moderated at a departmental level, reviewed by the external examiner and then approved by the Faculty. There is evidence that this process is effective. For example, the external examiner for the Diploma in Diaconal Studies identified under-assessment of learning outcomes, which the College then addressed.

2.43 A generic marking scheme is available to all students in the College Handbook. Feedback on assessments is detailed and constructive; students expressed appreciation of the traffic light system used in feedback, which helps them to identify strengths and weaknesses in order to improve. Analysis undertaken by the College of the impact of the traffic light system of feedback indicates that it is effective in supporting students to improve their academic writing skills, and the College now plans to develop better consistency in its implementation across programmes and modules.

2.44 Moderation of assessed work is effective and follows the policies of both the University and the College; the review team saw evidence that first and second markers discuss and agree final grades.

2.45 Plagiarism-detection software is available to all undergraduate and postgraduate students on University programmes but not to staff from the College or for students on PTFI

awards; the College recognises that this is a weakness. Staff explained that they are able to identify academic misconduct by recognising a change in writing style and gave an example of this in practice. The College attempts to minimise the opportunity for academic misconduct by providing advice and guidance to students through, for example, its Assessment Policy and Academic Integrity Policy for PTFI Online Programmes. However, neither document clearly outlines for students nor staff how academic misconduct is detected and investigated and the potential penalties that could be applied. The review team **recommends** that the College establishes, implements and ensures staff and student awareness of processes for the prevention, detection and consequences of academic misconduct.

2.46 All marks for University programmes are presented to the University's Board of Examiners for confirmation of award or progression. There is no requirement from the University for the College to hold its own module boards. For PTFI programmes, the Faculty receives marks and makes recommendations on progression and awards, subject to the PTFI's approval.

2.47 The College is subject to the University's policies for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for University students. For PTFI students, the College operates its own Prior Learning Policy, although there have been no recent applications for credit transfer for either awarding partner. The College's own policy has been applied in the case of students applying to study for ministry, where those with a previous Theology degree have had their Ministerial pathways adjusted to recognise and accommodate the previous learning.

2.48 Students on University programmes may apply for reasonable adjustments to their assessments in accordance with the Student Disability Policy and Guidelines and minutes of the Theology exam boards demonstrate that reasonable adjustments are applied effectively. Students on PTFI awards are also made aware of this opportunity in their Student Handbook and the College provides the necessary support, both in-house and through its Church network.

2.49 Assessment practices are sound and provide a fair and equitable basis for achievement of learning outcomes. However, the lack of transparency in the detection, investigation of and sanctions for academic misconduct indicates insufficient emphasis in the College's planning processes to ensuring the quality of its provision. The Expectation is met and the level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**

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

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

#### **Findings**

2.50 The College follows the University's procedures for external examining of its programmes, as addressed in the nomination form provided by the University. External examiners are full members of the IOT Examination Board within the University.

2.51 For PTFI programmes, the process of external examiner appointment is detailed in the Externality Policy. The Programme Design and Review Policy outlines how external examiners are consulted in the process for designing and reviewing programmes and modules. The process by which external examiner feedback is received and considered within the deliberative committee structure is also outlined in the Externality Policy.

2.52 The review team examined the effectiveness of these procedures in practice by examining external examiner feedback, minutes of meetings where these reports were discussed, the provider's response to external examiners' reports and by meeting senior and teaching staff, and students.

2.53 The external examiners appointed to each programme are recorded on programme specifications. The current external examiners at PTFI are listed in the UTC Student Handbook, and though the role of the external examiner is not explained there, students reported being told about external examiners during their induction and were aware of how to access the reports relating to their programmes either as digital or physical copies.

2.54 Recognising the need to adopt a more robust process for managing the work of external examiners, the College has in February 2019 amended its Externality Policy in order to formalise the process by which external examiner feedback should be requested and considered. Each external examiner is now expected to produce a formal annual report using a designated template which is delivered to Faculty and then fed through to the Curriculum Panel. A summary of the comments is then sent to the Management Committee, though this is not reflected in the terms of reference of these bodies. There is evidence of external examiner feedback being considered within this new reporting structure. Given the progress made thus far, the review team **affirms** the steps being taken to formalise and implement the process for consideration of and responding to external examiners' reports.

2.55 While the reporting structure takes into account the consideration of, and responses to, external examiners' reports, it does not describe how actions arising from these reports are centrally considered and actioned. Similarly, the external examiner annual report form does not allow for the external examiner to comment on whether previous recommendations have been acted upon. The lack of oversight of actions arising from external examiners' reports contributes to the recommendation made in Expectation B8.

2.56 The current arrangements allow the College to make scrupulous use of external examiners at all stages of programme design and review, as well as in the setting and maintaining of academic standards. The College is taking steps to address the need for a formalised process to consider and respond to external examiners' reports. The Expectation is met, and the 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**

2.57 The University has overall responsibility for monitoring and reviewing its programmes. It discharges this responsibility through a three-tier approach: module reviews; Continuous Action for Programme Enhancement; and periodic review. The College contributes to this by gathering student feedback and contributing to the annual Continuous Action for Programme Enhancement report. For PTFI programmes, a new Programme Design and Review Policy has been written and is in the process of being implemented. These arrangements, if securely implemented, would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.58 The review team explored the effectiveness of these processes by examining relevant policies and procedures, monitoring and periodic review reports, minutes of Quality Action Team meetings and Curriculum Panel meetings, minutes of departmental meetings where student progress is discussed and by meeting staff and students.

2.59 Currently, for PTFI programmes, module reviews are completed by lecturers and student feedback is gathered on modules, but there is no systematic process for considering and acting on this feedback in order to enhance and develop the programmes. The College has recently (in 2018-19) developed a policy for Programme Design and Review that sets out a rigorous monitoring and review cycle involving module reviews and annual reviews as well as periodic reviews. However, the College acknowledges that this recent policy is not yet fully embedded within its practices. Periodic review of PTFI programmes has not taken place since 2009, and the Programme Design and Review Policy proposes a timetable for this activity starting in 2021. Recently established programmes including the online Master of Theology do not yet have a timetable for periodic review. The period of as much as 12 years between reviews of programmes poses a risk to their currency and academic credibility. The review team **recommends** that the College establishes and implements effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and review of programmes.

2.60 Data on student progression, completion and achievement is currently discussed at a departmental level and reported to Faculty. The progress of ministry students is also reported to the Council for Training in Ministry. However, the team saw no evidence that this data is used effectively to inform the programme monitoring and review process for PTFI programmes.

2.61 Although the College has taken some initial steps to address the shortcomings in processes for the monitoring and review of its programmes, its processes are not yet fully established or embedded within current practice and a gap remains in its plans for ensuring academic currency and credibility of programmes through regular periodic review. The current lack of a systematic and embedded process for capturing and addressing actions resulting from module and programme reviews, both annually and periodically, indicates that insufficient priority is given to assuring standards and quality in the College's planning processes. The Expectation is not met, and the level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Not met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**

**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**

2.62 The College's responsibilities for handling complaints and appeals depend on the requirements of the awarding partners. The process for students who are registered on University undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes is outlined in the Memorandum of Agreement and the University's General 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.

2.63 The College has sole responsibility for handling complaints by PTFI students, as well as for handling allegations of plagiarism or other academic misconduct. The College uses its complaints procedure as the vehicle for dealing with academic appeals. The relevant processes are set out in the College handbook and a copy is provided for all students when they begin their studies.

2.64 While students on University programmes may have recourse to the Northern Ireland Ombudsman after the University's processes have been exhausted, for students on PTFI programmes the Faculty is the final authority in respect of any complaint.

2.65 These arrangements, if securely implemented, would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.66 The review team examined the effectiveness of the arrangements by scrutinising documentation including the Memorandum of Agreement between the College and the University, the IOT and College handbooks, the University and IOT websites, and the University's VLE. The review team also held meetings with senior, academic and professional support staff, students, and a PCI minister responsible for supervising placement students.

2.67 The review team heard that College staff are readily accessible to students on a daily basis allowing problems or complaints to be 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 likely initially to discuss any concerns informally with their tutors or the Principal.

2.68 The College has a secure process for handling student complaints and academic appeals, and students know where to find the information about these procedures. Informal opportunities are available to enable students to resolve concerns at an early stage. 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**

2.69 In order to support students preparing to enter ordained ministry or community work on completion, two PTFI programmes feature vocational credit-bearing placements with local congregations. These placements range from one day to 12 weeks.

2.70 Students preparing for ordained ministry or diaconal ministry also undertake ministry assistantships or voluntary placements in third sector organisations. These existing relationships may be used as the context for credit-bearing placements, assessed by Faculty members. For those students who do not have existing opportunities to complete vocational assessments, a placement is sourced by the College. A Handbook is provided to external ministerial supervisors of placement students. However, the College does not have formal processes for managing the delivery of learning opportunities in student placements. As a result, the College's arrangements are not sufficient to meet the Expectation.

2.71 The review team scrutinised arrangements for implementing, managing and assessing student placements which included module specifications, student assessments, templates for minister feedback, minister handbooks and explanatory documents. The review team also met staff responsible for student placements, students who have been on placements, and a supervising minister.

2.72 In practice the majority of students complete their assessments in congregations or placement settings in which they are already placed for their ministry training or voluntary purposes. Those students who are training for the ministry are often already completing an assistantship within a PCI congregation to which they have been matched by the PCI's Assignments Panel. Where there is no existing placement opportunity a suitable placement is identified by the student's module coordinator.

2.73 The review team heard that, in general, community and local congregations are known by College staff prior to placing a student with them and are matched in order to provide the best development opportunity for the student. Once a placement location is decided a link-person or supervising minister is appointed to provide a point of contact between the organisation and the College. Handbooks provided to supervising ministers by the PCI explain their role in the student's assistantship and the student's study needs, but no equivalent guide exists for students on placements which do not form part of ministry assistantships. The College holds an annual meeting with supervising ministers to inform them of the College's expectations of them as supervisors. The review team met a supervising minister who expressed positive views about the support received from the Dean of Ministerial Studies and Development; students expressed the view that placements had matched their needs well and were also positive about the support they had received from the Dean of Ministerial Studies and Development.

2.74 At the end of the placement each student completes a self-evaluation and supervising ministers complete a short evaluation form of the student. This feedback is then reported to the assignments panel for consideration of each student's learning pathway. The award of credit is based on assessment by members of full-time teaching staff of students' practical work during visits to the placement, and of students' written work.



2.75 The College does not establish formal arrangements with the organisations in which its students are placed, and states that this is because such organisations are already required to meet the standards of their wider bodies such as the PCI or the charities they are part of. The College's confidence in the security and suitability of individual placements relies on staff possessing personal knowledge of the placements.

2.76 However, the College does not have formal processes for carrying out risk assessments of placements in respect of health and safety or safeguarding purposes, or for assessing the quality of learning opportunities or the level of academic standards prior to the start of a placement. The College does not conduct its own due diligence procedure to check the capacity of each placement provider to fulfil its role. These weaknesses indicate insufficient emphasis on ensuring quality and standards in the College's planning of placements. The review team **recommends** that the provider establish, implement and effectively manage secure arrangements for the delivery of learning opportunities in student placements.

2.77 The College does not have secure arrangements for managing the academic standards and quality of learning opportunities of student placements. This weakness indicates insufficient emphasis being given to assuring standards and quality in the College's planning processes. The Expectation is not met, and the level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Not met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**

**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**

2.78 The College offers programmes and provides supervision leading to the award of Master of Philosophy, Master of Research and Doctor of Philosophy by the University. Research students are registered students both of the College and the University, and are subject to the University's procedures regarding admission, supervision, progression and examination, which secure academic standards. These are laid out in the University's General Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes. Prospective candidates can find an overview of the procedure on the IOT website; further information is available on the main University website.

2.79 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. The Education and Postgraduate Committee of the IOT oversees research degrees.

2.80 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.

2.81 To examine the effectiveness of the arrangements in place in relation to research degrees, the review team scrutinised documentation, including handbooks, regulations, minutes of meetings, periodic review reports and action plans. The review team also met academic staff who act as supervisors, and College-based research students.

2.82 Research students expressed the view that the College's arrangements work effectively. Following enrolment, research students have access to a comprehensive induction programme offered by the University's 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.

2.83 Following their initial enrolment, research students are subsequently registered as PhD students following successful completion of 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. All supervisors of research students are required to meet the standards laid down in the University's Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes; new supervisors attend a one-day training course delivered by the University's Graduate School.

2.84 College staff who provide supervision are all research active and are supported in their research activity by the College's sabbatical leave policy.

2.85 In collaboration with the University, the College provides a research environment that secures academic standards for research as well as for 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 Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

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

2.86 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. Of the 11 Expectations in this judgement area, six (Expectations B2, B4, B5, B7, B9 and B11) are met with a low level of risk, three (Expectations B1, B3 and B6) are met with a moderate level of risk, while two (Expectations B8 and B10) are not met, with a moderate level of risk.

2.87 The single feature of good practice identified in this judgement area relates to the quality of pastoral care provided to students in support of their personal and professional development.

2.88 There are six recommendations in this judgement area. The first relates to the need to consistently apply the College's process for approval of new programmes. The second arises from the need to establish and implement the teaching and learning strategy. The third relates to the need for appointments of full-time teaching staff to take account of the diversity and needs of all students. The fourth relates to the need to establish awareness of processes for managing allegations of academic misconduct. The fifth arises from the lack of a secure process for the regular and systematic monitoring and review of programmes. The final recommendation relates to the need to establish secure arrangements for the delivery of learning opportunities in student placements.

2.89 The single affirmation in this judgement area arises from the steps already being taken to implement a process for considering and responding to external examiners' reports.

2.90 The team noted that several criteria for a judgement of 'requires improvement to meet UK expectations' were met. While most Expectations were met, and those which were not met did not present serious risks, the level of risk in Expectations B8 and B10 could, without action, lead to serious problems over time in the management of these areas of provision. While the College had identified and had begun to address some weaknesses, some aspects of its plans to do so were not yet fully embedded in its operational planning, particularly in relation to Expectation B8.

2.91 The review team also considered the criteria for a judgement of 'meets UK expectations'. It noted that nine of the 11 applicable Expectations had been met and that the Expectations which were not met did not pose serious risks. The team also noted that the College, in its recent preparation of action plans, had acknowledged the need for action and had provided evidence of action being taken on reasonable timescales, for instance in relation to the management of external examiners' reports in respect of Expectation B7.

2.92 Finally, the review team noted the College's response to areas of weakness identified in the report of the Monitoring Visit of 2018. The team formed the view that the nature and promptness of this response provided evidence that the College is fully aware of its responsibilities for assuring the quality of its provision, and offered confidence that the College will address areas of weakness promptly and professionally. In view of this, the team concluded that the quality of student learning opportunities at the provider **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 provides 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 paper-based prospectus for prospective students and for distribution at schools' career conventions and University open days. For PTFI awards, responsibility for published information lies with the College Bursar and the Principal.

3.2 These arrangements, if securely implemented, 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's website and its VLE. The team also held meetings with senior, teaching, support staff, and students.

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 file management system has been introduced to clarify and formalise the management of information to facilitate ease of access.

3.5 The College's website is praised by students for its accuracy, friendliness and ease of use, and 98 per cent of students surveyed were 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with information received prior to starting or in the first few weeks of their programmes. 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. The College is seeking alternative arrangements to replace the separate browser-based document management system used for PTFI students until very recently. Students confirm that the information provided to them pre-entry was accessible and accurate. Students enrolled on University awards find the information on the University website and VLE to be accurate and informative, and report that they have

access to external examiners' reports for their modules. Programme specifications and module descriptions for PTFI modules and qualifications are published in the College handbook.

3.7 The College has effective procedures to ensure that the information it provides is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. 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

3.8 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. The College effectively manages its responsibilities for the production of information for its various audiences. The single Expectation for this judgement area is met and the associated level of risk is low.

3.9 The College provides information about its provision which is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. The review team concludes that the quality of the information about learning opportunities at the provider **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 is to prepare students to make effective and positive contributions to society and across the world, to equip students for effective ministry in the PCI, and to provide research-informed teaching and innovative approaches to learning and assessment. It has identified four strategic priorities in support of this mission: embedding processes for PTFI programmes in its provision, following the ending of the relationship with the University; establishing the Master of Divinity programme for effective ministerial training within the PCI; formalising the use of external sources for broadening and deepening its curricular coverage; and formalising student engagement through the College's committee and panel structures. The College has two action plans intended to address current strategic priorities and overseen by the Principal. These arrangements, if securely implemented, would allow the Expectation to be met.

4.2 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, and with students.

4.3 The College's action plan of December 2018, intended to address the outcomes of the Monitoring Visit of 2018, supports some aspects of its stated priorities, through securing greater student representation on College committees, the establishment of a formalised procedure for managing the work of external examiners and reviews and consultation about the relationship between the College and the PCI in respect of ministerial training. The College's Internal Action Plan for 2018-19 identifies 14 areas for action, some of which address aspects of the College's strategic priorities, including the development of new PTFI programmes and strengthening of the student voice by the establishment of a General Student Committee.

4.4 The College affirms its commitment to continuous improvement and to acting effectively on feedback, acknowledging that procedures are often informal and relational rather than embedded in formal planning processes. The review team found that the College's action plans do not incorporate a clear focus on its stated priorities, and that the College did not present a clear strategy for putting them into effect. While the action plans describe improvements being undertaken to the College's provision, many of these are localised and in response to externally identified weaknesses rather than in support of the identified strategic priorities. The review team **recommends** that the College takes steps to fully embed its strategy for enhancement in the College's planning processes.

4.5 The College is taking deliberate steps to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities. However, the lack of clarity in its approach to embedding its strategic priorities in its planning processes indicates a weakness in the operation of its governance structure. The Expectation is met and the level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**



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

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

4.7 The College has taken deliberate steps to enhance student learning opportunities, but there is a lack of clarity in its strategy for doing so. The single recommendation in this judgement area relates to the need to fully embed its strategy for enhancement in its planning processes. The Expectation for this judgement area is met and the associated level of risk is moderate.

4.8 The review team concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the provider **meets** UK expectations.

## Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to terms that may be used in this report.

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

### **Academic standards**

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

### **Award**

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

### **Awarding organisation**

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

### **Blended learning**

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

### **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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