



Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Union Theological College, May 2021

Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that Union Theological College (the College;UTC) is making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the [May 2020 desk-based analysis](#).

The impact of COVID-19

2 As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the monitoring visit was conducted online and included meetings with senior management teams, teaching staff and students. The scope of the evidence considered, and the nature of the judgements and operational milestones have remained the same but with some adjustments due to the online format. A risk assessment was carried out prior to the review to identify and mitigate any potential risks.

Changes since the last monitoring visit

3 The College is currently teaching out Queen's University Belfast (QUB; the University) validated programmes, with 26 full-time undergraduate students due to complete this academic year. Of the five remaining part-time students, teaching out plans are in place, and it is expected that four will graduate in 2021-22 and two will graduate in 2022-23. In addition, one MRes student is due to graduate in 2021 and five PhD students are due to complete in 2022-23. To safeguard the interests of these students, QUB is currently drafting an addendum to the current partnership agreement which is due to end in 2020-21.

4 The College also offers postgraduate programmes awarded through the Presbyterian Theological Faculty, Ireland (PTFI) under its original Royal Charter. The forthcoming termination of the partnership with QUB means that PTFI is now being used as the degree-awarding body and this has required a recent updating of the original Charter. The Postgraduate Diploma in Ministry is being phased out with the final cohort of four students due to finish in 2020-21. The Master's in Theology (Reformed Theology), with 14 part-time students and one full-time, and the Postgraduate Certificate in Biblical Greek, with four part-time students, are all delivered online. The Master of Divinity, with 11 students, is offered as a part-time residential but now will also be offered with attendance of one day a week. The programme specification is under revision to reflect this change in the delivery. Two new programmes commenced in 2020-21, the Master's in Theology (New Testament), with three full-time students and one part-time, and the Master's in Arts (Theology) at UTC with four part-time students. The MA Theology is taught in two cohorts - one directly through the College and one by the BibleMesh Institute under a Memorandum of Agreement. The College also offers a PhD awarded by the PTFI, with three full-time and three part-time students currently enrolled.

5 The College is currently developing a partnership with St Mary's University (SMU) for the validation of a new BA (Hons) in Theology; an initial approval meeting is due in early June 2021 and a validation event later in the month, with a first cohort due to start in

September 2022. The College plans to market this programme after the early June meeting, with a Memorandum of Agreement drafted after the approval event.

6 There has been a recent change of Principal with the Very Reverend Professor Stafford Carson retiring in December 2020 and Reverend Professor Gordon Campbell, the Head of Biblical Studies, taking the Principalship in January 2021. There are 5.6 full-time academic staff and 15 fractional staff making up nearly three full-time equivalents.

Findings from the monitoring visit

7 The review team reviewed the Annual Monitoring Return, supporting evidence and supplementary documentation requested prior to the monitoring visit, as well as meeting with senior and academic staff and students. All actions from the previous desk-based exercise have been complete (paragraph 8). The current programme and module monitoring processes were found to be comprehensive with the expectation that they will be used for all current and future programmes offered by the College (paragraph 9). There are various mechanisms to enable the student voice, although it was recognised by the College that greater use could be made of PTFI student representatives (paragraph 11). Student achievement has been described positively with the external examiner process confirming confidence in the comparability of academic standards with other UK providers (paragraph 12).

8 The only outstanding action from the previous desk-based exercise relates to progress in ensuring that the appointment of full-time academic staff takes account of the diversity and needs of all students so that individual students are able to develop and achieve their academic, personal and professional potential. However, the College reports that it has had no relevant staff vacancies. This has been resolved with the appointment of a full-time Head of Academic Administration to promote diversity including with respect to support of female students. Also, QUB students are supported by the Director of the University's Institute of Theology and have access to QUB services and support. Students confirmed that they have scheduled meetings with personal tutors, which have been conducted via Microsoft Teams during the pandemic, supplemented by informal support where necessary. It is expected that the students who join the new SMU programme will experience the same level of support as the current college students.

9 The College's QUB students follow the University's approach to module reviews and the annual Continuous Action for Programme Enhancement (CAPE) exercise, in conjunction with Faculty Module Review meetings. CAPE makes extensive use of external examiner reports, as well as feedback from students via student surveys, module evaluation and a Staff-Student Consultative Committee. Module reviews consider assessment performance, external examiner reports, module evaluation forms, students' tutor evaluation forms, programme specifications, programme learning outcomes map and the previous year's report.

10 In 2020-21, the PTFI online students completed a mid-semester survey and were provided with the opportunity to complete an online Teaching Evaluation Questionnaire and a Module Questionnaire which were considered at a dedicated review meeting. In the context of different approaches to monitoring, the team heard that this exercise, originally a QUB process, would now be adapted for both the College's PTFI and SMU students in order to improve the collection of student views about the quality of their educational experience.

11 The QUB Student Voice Committee for Theology met on two occasions in 2020-21 but student representatives also attend several college bodies including the Higher Education Advisory Panel (HEAP), the Quality Action Panel, a Teaching and Learning Panel and the Academic and Student Affairs Panel, which has specific responsibility for reviewing

student support, resources and representation. During the pandemic, students have also had a voice at virtual cafés, online forums and virtual coffee mornings. Students provided examples of changes made in response to their feedback - for example, improvements to the quality of online materials during the pandemic, amendments to the number of assessments and a reduction in time previously taken to provide assessment feedback. Student concerns over a reduction in the number of modules offered as the partnership with QUB moves to closure, remain more of a challenge and the College acknowledged that offering a full range of modules has been difficult to resolve for reasons of financial viability. It was further recognised by the senior team and staff, that greater and better use could be made of PTFI student representatives. However, students are largely satisfied with the variety of both formal and informal feedback mechanisms and described tutors as attentive and helpful.

12 Students are clear about how assessment is organised and how assessments have been graded. The College describes the 2019-20 cohort's achievement as commendable with, of the 41 students who graduated, seven achieving a first-class honours degree (17%), 31 a 2.1 (76%) and three a 2.2 (7%). Those figures compare favourably to the previous five years. The team also noted that module leaders have generally reported good student performance and that where concerns in performance have been identified, actions have been discussed during Faculty Module Review meetings and reported in the CAPE.

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

13 The College conducted a thorough review of the revised Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) at a special meeting involving the whole faculty in June 2020. This initiated a review of policies and the appointment of a new Head of Academic Administration, with specific responsibility for quality assurance and the continuing review of each academic policy against good practice in other higher education institutions and the Quality Code. The review prompted changes to the Concerns, Complaints and Appeals Policy; the Admissions Policy; the Programme Design and the Programme and Module Review Policy. A Strategic Enhancement Plan for 2020-21 outlines the changes made to policies in response to the Quality Code and actions taken to enhance learning and teaching.

14 The Externality Policy sets out the role of external examiners and the external reference points that should be used in the College's management of quality and standards. External examiners engage effectively with the College, with their feedback being considered at both the Board of Examiners and through the CAPE exercise for module and programme review. External examiners have commented favourably on the teaching and learning support provided to the students during the pandemic and have confirmed the standards and comparability of awards.

15 Additional external expertise and advice are employed on the HEAP which includes external subject specialists and higher education quality assurance experts, and has reported to Faculty on the design of new programmes and the monitoring of existing provision.

Background to the monitoring visit

16 The monitoring visit serves as a short check on the provider's continuing management of academic standards and quality of provision. It focuses on progress since the previous review. In addition, it provides an opportunity for QAA to advise the provider of any matters that have the potential to be of particular interest in the next monitoring visit or review.

17 The monitoring visit was carried out by Barbara Howell, Reviewer, and Dr Neil Casey, QAA Officer, on 18 May 2021.

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