



Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) of Union School of Theology

April 2018

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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 School of Theology. The review took place from 26 to 27 April 2018 and was conducted by a team of two reviewers, as follows:

- Ms Joanne Coward
- Dr Richard Samuels.

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)¹ setting out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and of each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

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

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

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

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

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

² QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk.

³ Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers): www.qaa.ac.uk/en/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 **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 comprehensive framework that supports Learning Communities and enriches the experience of distance learners (Expectation B4).

Recommendations

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

By July 2019:

- establish a process to use the expertise of placement providers to enhance student experience and employability (Expectation B10).

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 work underway to fully implement a formalised process for the design, development and approval of programmes and any subsequent modifications (Expectation B1)
- the continuing commitment to embedding processes that ensure all students are fully engaged in the life of the School (Expectation B5)
- the introduction of recently developed arrangements for placement providers. (Expectation B10).

Financial sustainability, management and governance

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

About the provider

Union School of Theology (UST/the School) is a non-denominational theological school, part of the charitable foundation, the ministry of Union Foundation that owns the school. It was originally formed in the 1930s as Barry Bible College and after successive name changes, in January 2016, was renamed and is now known as Union School of Theology. The change in name reflects the increasingly UK-wide provision and the extension of its educational work into mainland Europe and beyond.

There are currently 151 registered students; 30 for BA Honours, 64 for Graduate Diploma, 44 for Masters, and seven for research degrees. Six overseas students are also studying on the English Language programme, preparing them for IELTS, and Cambridge Language examinations. There are six full and two part-time teaching staff.

The School has offered validated degree programmes since the 1990s, working with the University of South Wales, the University of Wales Trinity St David, and most recently the University of Chester. Following a successful revalidation report and review from the University of Chester, in 2017 the validation partnership was withdrawn at short notice. The School are now in the final stages of approval for its programmes with the Open University. UST also has a new validating partner for the delivery of doctoral level education; Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU).

The previous Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) report from April 2017 highlighted a number of shortcomings during a difficult period for UST following the prolonged absence of the Provost due to ill-health and withdrawal of the University of Chester as a validating partner. A new Provost was appointed in September 2017.

Good practice in providing effective support for distance learning students has been maintained and arrangements for a new validating body are almost complete. The recommendations relating to policies and procedures to secure the design, development and approval of programmes together with fair admissions and complaints procedures have been successfully addressed. Information for students is now aligned with the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), and is accurate and accessible. Academic governance is clear and there are effective strategic approaches for the selection and support of Learning Communities and the implementation of enhancement.

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 University of Chester, as the current awarding body for taught undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, is responsible for ensuring that UST operates in accordance with the University policies and procedures, and ensures that each award is allocated explicitly to the appropriate level. Adherence to the University's policies would allow the Expectation to be met. However, the University of Chester is no longer the validating University for UST programmes, and their role in maintaining standards is subsequently being phased out. The Open University has recently agreed to validate future taught undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and VU is confirmed as the future awarding body for postgraduate research qualifications.

1.2 The team discussed arrangements with academic staff, examined arrangements with current and future awarding bodies, reviewed revalidation and external examiners' reports and examined a range of programme and module specifications, including those prepared for validation by the expected future awarding body for taught programmes.

1.3 The review team found that, within the context of its agreements, the School is effective in discharging its responsibilities for allocating qualifications to the appropriate level of the FHEQ and alignment with the relevant Subject Benchmark Statements. Current and proposed programme specifications and module outlines make clear and accurate reference to key external reference points, adhering to FHEQ requirements. Arrangements with the current awarding body secures threshold academic standards, with external examiner reports confirming that standards are being maintained and that learning outcomes are set at the appropriate benchmark standards.

1.4 UST refers to external reference points in a range of additional ways. The Teaching and Learning Policy refers to Subject Benchmark Statements for Theology and Religious Studies. The School also maps relevant processes and procedures directly to the QAA Quality Code for the University of Chester as the current awarding body and for the expected future awarding body for taught programmes.

1.5 UST demonstrates appropriate alignment with UK threshold standards. Collaboration between UST and its awarding bodies ensures that these standards are maintained. The team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

Findings

1.6 UST follows the academic frameworks and regulations of its awarding bodies as described in paragraph 1.1. Chester University is currently responsible for the Module Assessment and Progression Boards. and due to the change in validating partners, UST has developed further academic frameworks and regulations that follow the requirements of the OU as the future awarding body for taught programmes. In addition, the governance structure of the School has been reviewed following the previous QAA review in 2017. These arrangements and the governance structure have the potential to meet the Expectation.

1.7 The review team examined the effectiveness of arrangements, and scrutinised documentation including university regulations, terms of reference in the revised governance structure and minutes of committees. The team also discussed academic standards with senior management and the functioning of the committee structure with staff and students.

1.8 There is clear evidence of UST working cooperatively with the University of Chester as the awarding body, and with its future awarding bodies, to ensure academic standards are maintained. Reviews by awarding bodies and external examiners reports confirm that processes are protecting standards.

1.9 UST has thoroughly reviewed its committee structure, resulting in the establishment of formal terms of reference and reporting lines. The responsibility for maintaining academic standards lies with the Academic Board, which is chaired by the Provost and includes student representation and external specialists. To fulfil the role in ensuring standards, an additional Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) operates as a committee of the Academic Board. Day-to-day management is primarily the responsibility of the recently introduced Programme Committees led by the relevant Programme Leader. Terms of reference provide clarity on the role of committees and the inclusion of external specialists at Academic Board strengthens the key decision-making body. Though not yet fully embedded, senior management understand the revised role of committees, and minutes show that the new structure is functioning effectively. The committee structure will require evaluation at the next annual monitoring visit.

1.10 UST works appropriately with awarding bodies and the revised committee structure ensures compliance with their academic frameworks and regulations. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (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

1.11 Awards offered at UST are underpinned by programme specifications, which are available to staff and students through the School VLE and Student Handbooks. Programme specifications or programme adjustments are developed at UST and are sent to the relevant awarding body for approval to ensure compliance with the academic framework and regulations. The programme specifications are maintained by the validating partner along with records of Examination Boards and awards made

1.12 Transcripts and certificates are the responsibility of the awarding body and the University of Chester issues awards following the Awards Assessment Board. UST issues separate transcripts after each stage of a students' programme, maintaining records of student results. These arrangements have the potential to meet the Expectation.

1.13 The team assessed UST's approach to meeting this Expectation by scrutinising the relevant programme documentation and by talking to senior and professional support staff.

1.14 Students confirmed that programme-related material is available through the VLE and in handbooks. Key staff understand the process for modifying and approving changes to programme documentation.

1.15 The process for maintaining definitive records of awards and programmes is functioning effectively. Professional support staff are aware of their responsibilities, and of the required processes for the future awarding bodies.

1.16 UST maintains definitive records while complying with responsibilities set by the current awarding body. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the level of associated 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

1.17 The approval and modification of programmes, modules, and qualifications is undertaken using the academic regulations and quality frameworks from each of the awarding bodies. In support of this, the School has developed policies through which it identifies new programmes or module development or the need for modifications to existing provision. Both Chester and the Open University as the awarding bodies, hold the definitive programme and module documentation. The School uses its recently established governance structure to support programme development. New proposals are discussed at the Academic Strategy Committee which are then considered by the Quality Assurance Committee and the Programme Committee. Academic Board has strategic oversight of quality assurance policies and has responsibility for overseeing approval processes and for the final sign-off before any formal approval event takes place.

1.18 The policies and procedures of the School would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.19 A checklist of responsibilities clearly states the respective roles and responsibilities of the School and its awarding bodies. Programmes and modules are drafted using templates provided by each of the awarding bodies through which the School can demonstrate that it meets their requirements

1.20 Each of the School's awarding bodies has formal approval policies that ensure programmes are designed in the context of each awarding bodies' respective academic regulations, the Quality Code, the FHEQ and the relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.

1.21 The School has significant experience in developing programmes and modules, working with several higher education institutions over a substantive period. The team is well experienced in developing the curriculum and working within the frameworks of their awarding bodies. The recently revised governance structure provides a more secure oversight of developments and modifications of the curriculum. In preparation for the Open University becoming the School's awarding body for its undergraduate programmes and the taught postgraduate programme, the School held a series of review days in which academic staff undertook a fundamental review of programme and module specifications to meet the expectations of the Open University and in response to student feedback.

1.22 The School ensures that academic standards are set at a level which meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification and are in accordance with their own and the awarding bodies' academic frameworks and regulations. The team concludes that based on the evidence collected, this Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

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

Findings

1.23 The School has approved programme and module specifications that detail how learning outcomes are assessed and measured against threshold standards. To achieve this, the School uses the Quality Code, FHEQ, relevant Subject Benchmark Statements and Master's and Doctoral Characteristics Statements to ensure that threshold standards are achieved. The School's awarding bodies, Chester University, the Open University and VU provide policy frameworks, including academic regulations, through which they assure that the School delivers and assesses to the requisite threshold standards. The School has used these frameworks and UK threshold standards to develop marking criteria derived from both UK threshold standards and the academic regulations of its awarding bodies. This supports the maintenance of academic standards.

1.24 The policies and procedures of the School would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.25 Both Chester University appointed external examiners and the Open University Board of Examiners has responsibility for commenting on the achievement of threshold standards. Chester University uses its annual monitoring review process to ensure that this expectation is met. Similarly, the Open University's Continuous Improvement and Enhancement policy will undertake an annual review of this aspect of UST's provision. In addition, Chester University, and in the future the Open University will undertake periodic review and revalidation of its awards that incorporates a review of the assessment of learning outcomes and the meeting of threshold standards. The School has a memorandum of understanding with VU as the new awarding body for the award of doctoral degrees. The University does not require any specific regulations for the School to follow.

1.26 The School has well-established internal processes to ensure that programme and module specifications, and learning outcomes are assessed and measured appropriately. The governance structure makes effective use of external examiner reports, annual and periodic reviews as well as the outcomes of Boards of Examiner meetings to ensure that it continues to meet this expectation. Programme Committees review module outcomes, and student performance and ensure that external examiner comments are considered fully. Programme Leaders provide valuable support in identifying where learning outcomes need to be modified. This has been particularly evident during the recent Open University programme approval.

1.27 There are well-established procedures to ensure the achievement of learning outcomes through appropriate assessment and the School, together with its awarding bodies ensure that both UK threshold standards and their own academic standards have been satisfied. The team concludes that this Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

Findings

1.28 Chester University undertakes a periodic review every three years and a revalidation every five years, of its awards delivered at the School. In 2016 taught provision at undergraduate and postgraduate levels were revalidated by Chester for a further six years to cover the teach-out period for students remaining on its awards as the partnership with Chester ends. Each review confirms whether provision is aligned with the FHEQ, is cognisant of the Quality Code, the relevant subject benchmarks, institutional regulatory frameworks and academic regulations. The outcomes of reviews are considered at Academic Board. The processes in place would allow this Expectation to be met.

1.29 The team assessed UST's approach to meeting this Expectation by scrutinising the relevant programme documentation and by talking to senior and professional support staff.

1.30 In autumn 2017, following Chester's decision to end the partnership with UST, the School undertook a systematic and thorough review of its taught provision in readiness for the transition to its new awarding body, the Open University. The School has subsequently been successful in its institutional and programme approval events with the Open University, held in March and May 2018 respectively.

1.31 The School undertakes annual programme-level monitoring, using the quality frameworks of its awarding bodies. The Programme Leader drafts each annual monitoring review report for consideration at Programme Committee and subsequently at Academic Board. Each report incorporates comments from external examiner reports and student feedback. In the future, the Open University Board of Examiners will also provide feedback for monitoring purposes. Academic Board oversees responses to issues raised during the review and the resulting action plan. Student representatives are members of both Programme Committees and Academic Board and so have an opportunity to contribute to annual monitoring processes.

1.32 The Provost chairs the QAC that has responsibility within the School for monitoring the overall quality of all taught and research provision, in partnership with the Academic Board. It ensures that provision continues to meet external benchmark standards, by evaluating the outcome of monitoring processes and responses to external examiners.

1.33 The School has well-established processes for the monitoring and reviewing of standards. The outcome of both annual and periodic reviews shows the School provides appropriate critical reflection to student feedback, external examiners and from management information acquired through the monitoring of student performance and achievement. The School has responded promptly to any issues or concerns raised resulting from review processes. These changes have included, for example, improvements to the quality of videos of teaching events, library provision, and the assessment of learning outcomes. The School deliberately undertook a more in-depth and fundamental review of its taught undergraduate provision in anticipation of a successful institutional and programme approval by the Open University. Students are now seen to be stakeholders in these processes through formal student feedback and representation on most committees within the

governance structure, although there is a challenge to ensure student representative attendance at meetings because of the growth in distance-learning delivery.

1.34 The review team determines that the systems and processes for monitoring and review of programmes is fully embedded within UST and that the School has significant experience in managing the meeting of this Expectation. The review team, therefore, concludes that this Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

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

Findings

1.35 The School makes extensive use of external expertise in the maintenance and setting of academic standards. The periodic review and revalidation process involves external expertise from both the awarding bodies and from elsewhere in the higher education sector through Approval and Review Panel membership.

1.36 The policies and procedures of the School would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.37 The team considered a range of academic external inputs, including external examiner reports, and held meetings with relevant staff, representatives of the student body and external associates of the School.

1.38 Annual monitoring processes require consideration of and responses to external examiners' reports. The reports and responses to them are considered initially at Programme level through the Programme Committees. Students have access to external examiner reports on the School's VLE and can comment on them through representation at Programme Committees. Academic Board considers all annual monitoring reports and its membership has recently been expanded to include an external adviser from another HEI and a representative from one of the School's Learning Communities. Neither of these two representatives are staff members at the School. Full-time salaried staff are expected to begin work towards becoming Fellows of the Higher Education Academy in the second year of their appointment that enables further externality to be brought to the School's provision. All staff have access to staff development to develop skills and knowledge.

1.39 The School's well-developed research culture ensures that the School remains externally focused and prevents introspection. The School makes good use of the external expertise of its staff and external examiners to inform curriculum and policy developments. The addition of an external adviser and a Learning Communities representative to Academic Board provides a further, useful, external perspective. The School regards the input of its externals, irrespective of role, as critical friends and responds positively and constructively to comments and suggestions in the same manner. The recent review of the School's taught provision has led to the introduction of a compulsory placement element to undergraduate programmes. This could provide another avenue for the School to incorporate external viewpoints into its development of the student experience. As discussed in Expectation B10, the School would benefit from greater use of the experience and expertise of placement providers to further develop the student experience.

1.40 The School uses a wide range of external expertise in the setting and maintenance of academic standards although greater use could be made of placement providers to enhance the student experience. The team concludes that this Expectation is met with a low level of risk.

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

1.41 In reaching its judgement about the Institute's maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its awarding bodies, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published Handbook.

1.42 All of the applicable Expectations in this area are met with low risk. There are no points of good practice, recommendations or affirmations made for this area.

1.43 The University of Chester, as the current awarding body for taught undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, is responsible for ensuring that UST operates in accordance with the University policies and procedures, and ensures that each award is allocated explicitly to the appropriate level. In the future the Open University and VU, as the new awarding bodies, will be responsible for this function. The governance structure of the School has been reviewed following the previous QAA review in 2017 and the School has developed academic frameworks and regulations that follow the requirements of the Open University as the future awarding body for taught programmes.

1.44 The School is effective in discharging its responsibilities for allocating qualifications to the appropriate level of the FHEQ and alignment with the relevant Subject Benchmark Statements. Current and proposed programme specifications and module outlines make clear and accurate reference to key external reference points, adhering to FHEQ requirements.

1.45 There are well-established processes for the monitoring and review of standards. The outcome of both annual and periodic reviews shows the School provides appropriate critical reflection to student feedback, external examiners and from management information acquired through the monitoring of student performance and achievement.

1.46 Approved programme and module specifications detail how learning outcomes are assessed and measured against threshold standards. Use of the Quality Code, FHEQ, relevant subject benchmarks and Master's and Doctoral Characteristics Statements ensure that threshold standards are achieved. Programme and module specifications, and learning outcomes are assessed and measured appropriately.

1.47 Academic Board is responsible for maintaining academic standards. The Board includes student representation and external specialists. QAC operates as a subcommittee of the Academic Board, and day-to-day management is the responsibility of the Programme Committees led by the relevant Programme Leader. Terms of reference provide clarity on the role of committees and the inclusion of external specialists at Academic Board strengthens the key decision-making body. Though not yet fully embedded, senior management understand the revised role of committees, and minutes show that the new structure is functioning effectively. The committee structure will require evaluation at the next annual monitoring visit.

1.48 The process for maintaining definitive records of awards and programmes is functioning effectively. Staff are aware of their responsibilities, and of the required processes for the expected future awarding bodies.

1.49 The School involves external expertise from both the awarding bodies and from elsewhere in the higher education sector through Approval and Review Panel membership. This gives confidence in the setting and maintenance of academic standards. The School

regards the input of its externals as critical friends and responds positively and constructively to comments and suggestions. The addition of an external adviser, and a Learning Communities representative to Academic Board provides a further, useful, external perspective. It would be beneficial for the School to use the experience and expertise of placement providers to further develop the student experience.

1.50 The review team concludes that the maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies **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 UST is responsible for programme design and development, using programme specifications that follow the template of the awarding bodies. Awarding bodies take final responsibility for programmes and the resulting awards. Current programmes at UST have been approved by the University of Chester and were revalidated in 2016. However, in response to the University of Chester's decision to withdraw from the role of validating partner, as described in paragraph 1.1, in future taught undergraduate and postgraduate programmes will be validated by the Open University and research programmes by VU.

2.2 In response to recommendations from the previous QAA review in 2017, internal programme development processes have been formalised and articulated in the Policy for Programme Design, Redesign and Development. Programme development plans are submitted to the Programme Committees and the Academic Strategy Committee, which subsequently makes recommendations to the Academic Board who approve the final document in advance of being formally submitted to the validating partner institution.

2.3 The policies and procedures relating to programme design, development and approval would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.4 The team considered the recently introduced policy, programme specifications, module descriptors and minutes of recent committees. The team also met with members of staff and students who had been involved in the recent programme review process.

2.5 The team concluded that UST operated effective processes for the 2017 internal programme review. Extensive consultation underpinned their development and used relationships with church communities and external partners. Students also confirm that UST is active in soliciting student feedback and responding to their ideas on programme and module design through the committee structure.

2.6 The recently ratified Policy for Programme Design, Redesign and Development provides clarity and depth to the programme development process, with guidelines provided to staff on module design. Although full embedding of recently approved processes is required, the review team **affirms** the work underway to implement a formalised process for the design, development and approval of programmes and any subsequent modifications.

2.7 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

Findings

2.8 Admissions processes are managed by the Academic Registrar and overseen by the Provost, and conform to the admissions processes of the relevant awarding body. In response to the 2017 QAA review, UST has designed a clear Admissions Policy that outlines admissions processes and complaints procedures. Prospective students receive information about UST through its prospectus and have access to taster days and open days, which allow students to visit the School and discuss programmes in detail.

2.9 The policies and procedures for admissions would enable the Expectation to be met.

2.10 The team scrutinised evidence such as recently introduced admissions processes and information provided to prospective students. The team also met with staff responsible for admissions and spoke to students about their experience with the recruitment process.

2.11 The team concludes that the new admissions policy is comprehensive and complies with the principles of fair admissions. A formal procedure is accessible on the School website and outlines prospective students' rights of appeal and complaint. Though no student had appealed at the time of the review, feedback from staff indicates that UST is proactive in supporting students who are unsuccessful at application and identify an alternative study plan.

2.12 Meetings with staff and students highlighted the supportive and inclusive nature of the application process. The School has a flexible approach to admissions criteria, with applications circulated to key members of staff who evaluate and decide on whether the student should be interviewed. Students who achieve the basic entry requirements are invited to interview with two members of staff. Evaluation and interview forms provide guidelines and structure to staff involved in the interview process. Staff are aware of how the principles of equality and diversity apply to UST, with a focus of interest on gender equality and non-standard application types.

2.13 The team found the recruitment process to be effective in ensuring that each prospective student has sufficient and accurate information to support them to decide on whether the course is suitable. Those who accept an offer at UST receive the Handbook of Policies and Procedures (Programmes) outlining terms and conditions, and the inclusion of an admissions checklist is designed to ensure that students understand the challenges faced on academic programmes. The handbook is also available on the UST website. Students stated that pre-arrival information was sufficient and that taster days and open days were available to them if they wished to consider further the suitability of UST. Also, at the time of the visit, the website and offer letters accurately and explicitly stated that taught programmes remained subject to successful validation.

2.14 The introduction of a comprehensive Admissions Policy provides clearly defined recruitment procedures and recent students comment positively on the effectiveness of the process. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met. The associated level of risk

is low because the systems in place are sound and to the satisfaction of the awarding bodies.

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

2.15 UST has a Teaching and Learning Strategy which outlines the principles and direction of academic delivery. The strategic approach is to be flexible in delivery to satisfy the requirements of the student body, most of whom are distance learners, while practising in the community. UST has invested significantly in the VLE because online learning provides the flexibility required when studying off-campus. Additionally, the School promotes Learning Communities outside the main campus, both in the UK and abroad, using Lead Mentors to facilitate learning in the Communities. UST has a Staff Development Policy and uses peer observations to disseminate good practice.

2.16 The policies and procedures of the School would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.17 The team evaluated the key documentation including evidence from the awarding body, programme and module specifications, staff qualifications, and evidence relating to staff development. The team also met senior staff, academic staff, a Lead Mentor, students and support staff.

2.18 Academic staff are supported effectively in their induction and professional development. UST have processes in place to ensure that new staff are effectively inducted with a senior faculty member acting as a mentor. Academic staff are well qualified, research active and provided with a variety of opportunities for professional development. Study leave is offered every five years and time is allocated within the week for additional non-teaching activities. An established observation policy and module feedback process provides structure to the annual staff review.

2.19 Academic staff have introduced innovative technological practice using interactive classrooms that link distance learners to the classroom experience. As discussed in paragraph B5 there is further scope to build on this innovative use of technology in teaching and learning as part of UST's commitment to embed practices that ensure all students are fully engaged in the life of the School.

2.20 Student performance is strong and employability outcomes are good. The results from module feedback, student submissions and at the Student Meeting provide evidence that there is a high level of student satisfaction with the institution. Students are complimentary about the quality of academic staff and speak highly of the experience that staff brought into the teaching and learning process. The team also found that issues raised by students are listened to and responded to quickly. An example provided of UST's responsiveness to student feedback is the provision of laptops on-site for students to access.

2.21 UST promotes an internal culture of community while building up links with the wider theological community. Staff and students are actively encouraged to participate in external activities. Additionally, the further development of Learning Communities enhances the learning experience of distant learners, providing networking opportunities and a structure of support through the use of Lead Mentors.

2.22 The evidence from documentation and meetings shows that UST has effective learning and teaching practices. Overall, students are very positive about their learning experience, with the School actively promoting a distinctive higher education learning community. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement

Findings

2.23 UST approaches learning from a broad theological perspective, providing academic, personal and professional development. Academic and pastoral support is provided by staff, and students are encouraged to engage in church activities. Students attend a week-long Annual Conference at the beginning of their course which includes training events, lectures and social activities. Learning opportunities are detailed in student handbooks and are accessible to all students electronically. The School's main resources are located in an on-site library and UST is a member of a number of theological associations in the US and UK that offer an international inter-lending network. Electronic resources are accessible to all students through the VLE. These arrangements would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.24 The review team considered relevant documentation, including programme handbooks, external examiner reports and the resource strategy and discussed aspects of student support with senior, academic and professional support staff as well as students.

2.25 The process for providing support to students is effective. Performance of students is good, as evidenced in the comments from external examiners, and student satisfaction is high. UST supports students with targeted study skills and language support where a need is identified. As a small institution, UST is able to provide a high level of contact time between staff and students, such as through regular meetings with personal tutors. Students comment that staff are accessible and approachable and that they value highly the level of theological expertise within the School. Students additionally confirm that UST actively encourages students to be engaged in the broader local community as part of their studies. Placement modules at undergraduate level are currently optional, but will be a required element from 2018-19 as part of the OU validated BA award.

2.26 Students state that they use academic resources available to them, including the VLE which has been developed by UST to ensure baseline standards in the learning environment. Distance learners, who benefit most from the VLE, additionally access a small library that each Learning Community is expected to provide, in line with the Memorandum of Understanding in place for each Learning Community. Some cases of distance learning students finding difficulties in accessing information have been reported and is the remit of the Librarian who is aware of the challenges and is considering ideas on how best to pool together specialised resources from numerous sources. A Library Development Strategy is providing clarity and direction for the future direction of resources.

2.27 The team found that UST has been effective in building up a flexible learning model to meet the needs of a diverse student body. As part of UST's strategic plan for delivering high-quality theological education, considerable effort at committee level has been made to support distance learning students through the development of Learning Communities UST has established processes and procedures with the intention of building a sustainable and strategic approach to the selection and support of Learning Communities. The School has a protocol for observing Learning Communities and provides a role description, key information and training to Lead Mentors. Through the Learning Communities, Lead Mentors monitor student progress, and have a general background in theology sufficient to give them an overall understanding of the material students are studying. UST monitor's student satisfaction across the learning communities to ensure that the School remains responsive

to the needs of the students. The comprehensive framework that supports Learning Communities enriches the experience of distance learners and is **good practice**.

2.28 The review team concludes that UST has established a learning environment to support a diverse range of students and that measures are in place to monitor the usefulness of the learning environment. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, Chapter B5: Student Engagement

Findings

2.29 Student engagement is underpinned by the School's student engagement policy. It sets out the process by which students are involved as partners and stakeholders in the design, development, and delivery of taught programmes. The newly-established governance structure enables students to be represented on all the School's academic governance committees where they are encouraged to provide feedback and input.

2.30 New students, irrespective of their programme or mode of study, are invited to attend an induction conference at the start of their programme where they can meet other students and their personal and academic tutors. During the conference, students also receive training and support in a number of areas including academic good practice and writing support. However, not all students are able to attend the conference, particularly those who are studying as distance learners or are based overseas.

2.31 Students can provide feedback to the School through a number of formal mechanisms. These include student representation, module evaluations, which take place at the end of each module delivery, and an annual student survey. The School has shared its response to the last QAA Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER (AP)) report with students and their input into the action plan has been actively sought. Similarly, as previously described, students have access to external examiner reports and can contribute to annual review processes. The School monitors attendance and each student is assigned a personal tutor to support their progression and achievement. The establishment of the Learning Communities is designed, with student input, to provide academic, social, and spiritual support for students. These arrangements would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.32 The School has successfully developed a learning environment where staff and students can actively engage in all aspects of School life, particularly through its establishment of Learning Communities. Students are encouraged to talk openly as well as give and receive formal and informal feedback. Students are involved in curriculum design and delivery and in the workings of the academic governance structure. However, the School has not yet been able to ensure consistent attendance from student representatives at meetings. This is a consequence of the move towards more distributed delivery of programmes in response to the need to improve student retention and performance through a more flexible and distributed learning environment and that the current governance structure is relatively new.

2.33 The School is aware of the challenges in engaging distance-learning students to ensure they feel part of the community within the School. It is considering ways in which Learning Communities, for example, can connect with each other through the VLE and the wider use of technology to establish a greater sense of belonging, and to enable the sharing of discussion and debate. The review team noted the School's commitment to developing further the level and quality of student engagement and **affirms** the continuing commitment to embedding processes that ensure all students are fully engaged in the life of the School.

2.34 The School takes deliberate steps to engage students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience. There is a continuing commitment to embed processes to ensure that all students, including distance

learners, are fully engaged in the life of the School. The team, therefore, concludes that the Expectation is met with a low level of risk.

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

2.35 The School currently applies Chester University's assessment regulations to those programmes awarded by them, and in the future, will use the adapted OU assessment regulations, and VU regulations for application within the School. The respective responsibilities for assessment between the School and each of its awarding bodies are detailed in two checklists of responsibilities.

2.36 The School has its own assessment policy, which is contained in the School's Handbook of Policies and Procedures. Academic staff are trained in marking and in the use of the School-designed marking protocol. There are clear marking criteria at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The role and purpose of external examiners is set out in the Handbook. They are required to approve assessment tasks, including all examination papers. Students' work is marked anonymously with a second marker used for moderation purposes. Two members of academic staff simultaneously double-mark all student dissertations. External examiners appointed by Chester University receive samples of moderated work determined by Chester's assessment policy. For Open University provision, a sample of assessed work will be sent to the Board of Examiners. There is no set sample size but the sample must include all fail marks and any borderline marks. For student work at Level 4, external examiners will only review fail marks. There is a clear remit with supporting processes for the Open University's Board of Examiners. External examiners comment at Examination Boards and then produce a formal annual report, to which the School is expected to respond. Students receive feedback and a provisional mark and ratified marks are released once approved by external examiners.

2.37 The arrangements for the assessment of students enable the Expectation to be met.

2.38 The review team read external examiner's reports, staff and student Handbooks, the awarding bodies' regulations, School policies, procedures and associated documentation. The team met with academic and support staff and students.

2.39 Examination regulations are available to all students on the School's VLE and on School noticeboards. Students receive training on academic good practice and academic writing at the Induction Conference. The School has an Extenuating Circumstances Committee that uses the School's Extenuating Circumstances Policy to determine each student claim.

2.40 The School has proven systems in place to ensure it manages the assessment policy and associated processes effectively. Staff are well-trained and supported to safeguard the fairness and integrity of assessment. External examiners are required to comment on whether threshold standards have been met, the application of marking criteria and on student performance. Both external examiner reports and the current awarding body has expressed satisfaction in the way the School manages assessment processes.

2.41 UST applies the assessment regulations of its awarding bodies that are available to all students on the VLE. Staff are well-trained and supported to safeguard the fairness and integrity of assessment that is confirmed by external examiners and the current awarding bodies. The team considers that this Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, Chapter B7: External Examining

Findings

2.42 The School recommends external examiners for its programmes to its awarding bodies' using their appointment policy and procedures. The responsibilities and roles of external examiners are set out in the responsibilities checklist for each awarding body. For the Open University, details can also be found in the Board of Examiners' terms of reference and in Chester University's external examiner regulations.

2.43 Once appointed, each external examiner produces an annual report in which they are asked to comment on a set of topics. These include consistency with the expectations of the Quality Code, adherence to university regulations, the appropriateness of the assessment tasks in relation to external benchmarks and frameworks, achievement of programme and module learning outcomes, and comparison of student performance with other higher education institutions.

2.44 Each external examiner report is considered initially at the Programme Committee and then subsequently at a meeting of the Academic Board. The relevant Programme Leader is responsible for drafting a response to each report and produces an action plan to deal with any issues and concerns raised by the external. External examiner comments are then incorporated into the annual monitoring process and report. One external examiner report was delayed in 2017-18 and will be considered in the forthcoming autumn 2018 Academic Board.

2.45 The policies and procedures of the School would enable this Expectation to be met.

2.46 All external examiner reports are available to students on the School's VLE. Students can contribute to discussion of reports and any resulting actions through their representatives at Programme Committees.

2.47 The external examiner system is well-established at the School and, as previously described, the School values the role external examiners play in the critical evaluation of curriculum delivery and student progress. While external examiner reports are discussed fully at Programme Committees, there is less evidence of the consideration of their reports at Academic Board. However, in considering all the evidence supplied and following meetings with staff and students, the review team concludes that the School demonstrates successfully that it meets this Expectation 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

2.48 Within the regulations of Chester University, the School undertakes programme monitoring annually and periodic review every five years. A periodic review and revalidation by the University of Chester in 2016 allows the School to continue to deliver Chester's programmes to existing students. In the future, the School will also undertake monitoring in line with OU and VU regulations and requirements. The annual monitoring and periodic review policies are clearly outlined in the School's policy handbook. The School will continue to use Chester University's policies during the teach-out period. Annual monitoring reports are drafted by the Programme Leader and considered by both the Programme Committee and Academic Board before being sent to the current awarding body for approval.

2.49 The processes in place for programme monitoring and review would allow this Expectation to be met.

2.50 The team considered a range of monitoring policies and procedures, minutes of meetings, reports and action plans and held meetings with a range of involved personnel, including students.

2.51 The School has considerable experience in managing and delivering effective programme monitoring and review processes. In 2017, the School undertook an extensive review and revalidation of all its provision in response to the need to establish an agreement with a new awarding body, but also to address low undergraduate student numbers and to address student and external feedback. The result of the review was a revised programme specification for the undergraduate programme and a greater emphasis on functional skills and biblical languages. The new programme will also reduce the number of modules on offer and increase the amount of compulsory content. The outcome of this review also led to the expansion of the School's Learning Communities to support distance-learning delivery. The School has used similar processes to respond to the 2017 HER (AP) report and produce the accompanying action plan.

2.52 The School uses programme and monitoring review effectively to review all aspects of its activity to continuously improve the quality of the curriculum and the student experience. This Expectation is met with a low level of risk.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints

Findings

2.53 The School currently operates Chester University's academic appeals policy and a separate complaints and grievance policy. The School is also a member of the Office for the Independent Adjudicator. The School will operate the academic appeals policy of OU and VU when their awards are delivered at the School. Both the academic appeals and the complaints policies are available to students on the School's VLE. The procedures in place would allow the Expectation to be met

2.54 The School has deliberately created a working environment within the School in which any issues or concerns raised by students are openly and freely discussed. Staff seek to deal with any complaints or concerns informally if possible. As a result, most complaints or concerns raised by students are managed without the need for referral to the formal policies or the OIA. Students confirmed in the student submission and in the meeting with the team that they are able to discuss any matters of concern with School staff, and that they are aware of the formal policies in place.

2.55 UST has in place procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of learning opportunities that are fair, accessible and timely. The review team concludes that this Expectation is met and the 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

2.56 UST is actively involved in collaborating with churches and other Christian organisations to provide placement opportunities. Placements in a theological context have been encouraged as part of the School's emphasis on linking theory to practice. Currently undergraduate students choose credit-bearing placement modules, but UST is planning to introduce a compulsory placement module for undergraduate students through the new validating partner.

2.57 The School's processes and procedures for organising and managing placements are described in the Union Placement Policy and would enable the Expectation to be met. Responsibility for approving placements and oversight of their organisation rests with the Pastoral Dean. Proposed placements are subject to risk assessment. A local supervisor completes a record of the students' activities and liaises with the School with any queries, or if problems arise. These arrangements have the potential to meet the Expectation.

2.58 The review team tested the Expectation by scrutinising the relevant policy and by talking to staff, an employer and students who had direct experience of work placements.

2.59 The team found that UST is flexible and supportive with placement arrangements. Students confirmed that they could choose a placement. Those students who engage in a placement are supported by the local supervisor and the School. They commented positively on its usefulness and relevance to future employability.

2.60 The Union Placement Policy has recently been updated to strengthen arrangements with placement providers. The policy provides a clear framework for providers including the process of selection, the identification of people responsible and the requirement of a risk assessment. For a placement to be recognised, UST must agree on the location and must subsequently provide support to a Local Supervisor through induction and training. Arrangements are also established for UST to periodically monitor the suitability of placements through observations. With plans to make placements a compulsory part of future taught undergraduate study, UST is in a strong position to broaden and strengthen arrangements with providers and have prepared a detailed Placement Handbook for the future academic year. The review team affirms the introduction of recently developed arrangements for placement providers.

2.61 UST is in the process of collaborating with new placement providers and is in a position to develop these working arrangements further. The review team recommends that by July 2019 UST establish a process to use the expertise of placement providers to enhance student experience and employability.

2.62 The arrangements for student placements support student learning opportunities and future employability. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, Chapter B11: Research Degrees

Findings

2.63 The University of Chester currently oversees the School's research degrees under the regulations outlined in the Research Handbook and Quality and Standards Manual. Students are admitted following a draft research proposal which is directed towards a potential supervisor. Currently UST research students registered with the University of Chester have a minimum of two supervisors, one appointed by the School and the other a Director of Studies appointed by the awarding body. Students are initially enrolled for a Master of Philosophy with the opportunity of upgrading to a doctorate.

2.64 A Director of Research is responsible for research provision, with a Research Committee established to review student affairs, supervision of students and programme development. The University of Chester is no longer acting as the awarding body for prospective research students and for future postgraduate research students the awarding body will be VU. Regulations for future research students will be required to comply with those of the new awarding body. These arrangements would enable the Expectation to be met.

2.65 The team tested the School's approach through meetings with staff and students. The team also reviewed a range of documentation, including committee minutes, student handbooks and arrangements and regulations with present and future awarding bodies.

2.66 The team found that internal structures are established to ensure that research students are fully supported. Research students are provided with a comprehensive postgraduate handbook and full access to UST resources. The on-site library contains an extensive range of journals with access to an international inter-lending network through membership of a number of theological associations. The School is active in looking at financially viable ways of pooling specialised materials from various sources to widen access to available resources.

2.67 UST has a flexible model for research students. Many research students are part-time and all are currently living off-campus. Though generally positive about their experience, one research student highlighted the challenge of researching outside the School community. The School is sensitive to such challenges and Skype is used for overseas research students to remain in regular contact with supervisors. In addition, UST has arrangements that enable off-campus research students to come together as part of a specialised research environment. Some students present a paper at the annual Research Conference and there are also regular research seminars throughout the year where papers are presented. These research events additionally allow students to engage with the UST faculty. Members of faculty are active in the wider research community and have a comprehensive record of publications.

2.68 The team considers that the School's provision and management of research degrees is carried out in an environment that secures academic standards for undertaking research. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.69 In reaching its judgement about the quality of student learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published Handbook.

2.70 All of the applicable Expectations are met, with good practice identified in Expectation B4, one recommendation with low risk in Expectation B10, and three affirmations identified in Expectations B1, B5 and B10.

2.71 New processes for the design, development and approval of programmes have been developed and are clear and well understood by staff. The policies and procedures used to admit students are fair, transparent, explicit and constantly applied.

2.72 UST has been effective in developing a flexible learning model to meet the needs of a diverse student body. Considerable effort at committee level has been made to support distance learning students through the development of Learning Communities. UST monitors student satisfaction across the learning communities to ensure that the School is able to remain responsive to the needs of the students. The comprehensive framework that supports Learning Communities and enriches the experience of distance learners is considered to be good practice by the team.

2.73 The team makes one recommendation regarding learning opportunities - for Expectation B10 the School should establish a process to use the expertise of placement providers to enhance the student experience and employability. Recently Academic Board membership has been expanded to include two representatives who are not members of staff. One of these is from one of the School's Learning Communities. This external expertise was also used in the review of programmes prior to validation with a new awarding body and could be used further to enhance the student experience and employability.

2.74 There are three affirmations relating to learning opportunities for Expectations B1, B5 and B10. For Expectation B1 the review team affirms the work underway to implement a formalised process for the design, development and approval of programmes and any subsequent modifications. In response to recommendations from the previous QAA review in 2017, internal programme development processes have been formalised and articulated in the Policy for Programme Design, Redesign and Development. This provides clarity and depth to the programme development process, with guidelines provided to staff on module design, although full embedding of recently approved processes is required.

2.75 An affirmation is made in Expectation B5 to continue UST's commitment to embedding processes that ensure all students are fully engaged in the life of the School. The School has successfully developed a learning environment where staff and students can actively engage in all aspects of School life, particularly through its establishment of Learning Communities. However, the School has not yet been able to ensure consistent attendance from student representatives at meetings, due in part to the high number of distance learners. The School is fully aware of the challenge to engage this group of students and is taking steps to increase their involvement.

2.76 The introduction of recently developed arrangements for placement providers is affirmed in Expectation B10. The Union Placement Policy has recently been updated to strengthen arrangements with placement providers. The policy provides a clear framework for providers including the process of selection, the identification of people responsible and the requirement of a risk assessment. The policy and accompanying arrangements has the potential to broaden and strengthen placement provision for the benefit of students.

2.77 The review team concludes 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 UST is responsible for ensuring the accuracy of information that is provided to all students and interested parties in a range of formats. The VLE and programme handbooks are viewed as the primary source of information for students, whereas promotional material is made available through the UST website, social media and published materials. Online material is approved and monitored internally according to the School's published procedures. The UST Public Information Procedures, recently approved by the QAC, provide clear separation of responsibility in relation to published information. The responsibility for accuracy and consistency of information lies with the Provost and The Executive Director takes responsibility for the coordination of materials. The awarding bodies have final approval of all publicity information. Prospective students access programme information through the UST handbook that is approved by the awarding body prior to publication.

3.2 The Marketing and Promotion Policy outlines requirements with information including the pre-arrival complaints procedure for students. As a direct action from the previous QAA review, UST has aligned handbooks with guidance from the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA).

3.3 The policies and procedures in place would allow the Expectation to be met.

3.4 The review team scrutinised a range of information sources and spoke to students and the staff responsible for the production of information to test whether the policy, process and procedures enable the School to meet the Expectation.

3.5 The School website is the main outward-facing means of communication with prospective students and the general public and includes sections on regulatory information such as the Complaints and Grievance Policy and Equal Opportunities Policy. There is a comprehensive range of accessible information for prospective students. Students confirm that the information available to them from the website is useful in helping them to decide on whether to study at UST. Students also confirm that Open Days and Taster Days are made available to them to support them in their decision. UST ensures that upon arrival students are made aware of policies and procedures including complaints at induction, and these policies are made available on the student portal.

3.6 The team found that information is being securely managed and implemented, and that information at the time of the visit is trustworthy. The School is ensuring that website marketing information states clearly the situation with current and future awarding partners. At the time of the visit, the information on the website explicitly informed prospective students that taught programmes were subject to validation. To ensure continued accuracy of information, the expected awarding body for taught programmes clarified that it was overseeing information provided to prospective students. With respect to information on postgraduate research, VU as the future awarding body has recently approved public information that is available to prospective students.

3.7 At the time of the visit the information was transparent, trustworthy and focused on the needs of its intended audience. Internal processes and those with future awarding bodies provide confidence that information will continue to be managed effectively. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

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

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

3.9 The College provides information about its higher education provision for prospective and current students, employers, staff, and public stakeholders, and for those with responsibility for maintaining standards and assuring quality. Information is accessible, appropriate and accurate.

3.10 No recommendations, affirmations or good practice points relate to this area.

3.11 Based on the documentation provided, and discussions with staff and students, the team concludes that the School provides information that is fit for purpose, trustworthy and accessible and in so doing Union School of Theology meets UK expectations for the quality of information about learning opportunities.

3.12 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 School has a Quality Enhancement Policy (QEP), supported by the School's strategic plan and through which the School aims to develop a 'culture of enhancement'. The purpose of this 'culture of enhancement' is to take deliberate steps to incorporate the practice of continuous improvement with more significant changes, when required.

4.2 Student engagement is a key part of the QEP with students seen as stakeholders in curriculum design and delivery and partners in the continuous improvement of the student experience. Student representatives are members of all academic-related committees within the School

4.3 The policies and procedures of the School would allow the Enhancement Expectation to be met.

4.4 The School uses student feedback from module evaluations, annual student surveys and from student representation to determine future changes. The significant changes to curriculum and its delivery made in 2017, was in direct response to and a consequence of the QEP. Students are invited to an induction conference at the start of their programme, where they meet other students, and their tutors, and attend a number of workshops. This ensures that they feel part of the whole School community. Students are assigned a personal tutor and the School operates an infrastructure that monitors welfare, progress, and achievement. The School's teaching and learning policy is reviewed every three years. All teaching staff have an induction, regular appraisals and have access to staff development. Staff are research active and all full-time salaried staff are required to hold at least an HEA Fellowship by the second year of employment. There is a staff development and peer observation policy in operation.

4.5 The School undertakes data analysis to review the impact of teaching delivery. Curriculum review also ensures that different teaching strategies are incorporated into delivery methods. Annual monitoring and responses to external examiner reports also ensure that a diverse range of assessment strategies is used. The School also reviews learning resources, which includes library provision.

4.6 The School's commitment to delivering enhancement is evident and well-received by staff and students. The School demonstrates this commitment through a number of recent developments and initiatives. The growth of the School's Learning Communities, the use of a Lead Mentor to support students within each Community and the recent introduction of a Link Tutor for Learning Communities, is a direct response to maintain student retention and engagement, and clearly provides an enhanced experience for the School's students. The School's new awarding body with its expertise in delivering distance-learning programmes could be an asset to achieving further innovation. There is also an opportunity to develop the role of placement providers, given that placements are to be a compulsory component in the undergraduate curriculum as a means of supporting employability at the School. The team were shown the extensive use of technology by one tutor to bring together learning communities. The use of the VLE and videoed lectures in single learning communities provides an opportunity to encourage curriculum delivery to enable discussion across Learning Communities. This area could be developed to further enhance the student experience.

4.7 The School has successfully demonstrated that it has the policy framework through which it can deliver enhancement and on-going improvements to the student experience. The review team having considered all the evidence provided to it, is satisfied that this Expectation is met and the residual risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.8 In reaching its judgement about the enhancement of learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against criteria specified within the Quality Code, summarised in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

4.9 The Expectation for this judgement area is met and the associated level of risk is low. There are no affirmations, recommendations or areas of good practice identified for this section.

4.10 The School has a Quality Enhancement Policy, supported by the School's strategic plan and through which the School aims to develop a 'culture of enhancement'. Deliberate steps are taken to incorporate the practice of continuous improvement with more significant changes, when required.

4.11 Student engagement is a key part of the quality enhancement policy with students seen as stakeholders in curriculum design and delivery and partners in the continuous improvement of the student experience. To augment this student representatives are members of all academic-related committees within the School.

4.12 Students are invited to an induction conference at the start of their programme, where they meet other students, their tutors and attend a number of workshops. This ensures that they feel part of the whole School community. Students are assigned a personal tutor and the School operates an infrastructure that monitors welfare, progress, and achievement.

4.13 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 in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Definitions of key operational terms are also given on pages 21-24 of the [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\) handbook](#).

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

Academic standards

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

Award

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

Awarding organisation

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

Blended learning

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

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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