

Higher Education Review (Foreign Providers) of the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin at Belfast

May 2017

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About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review (Foreign Providers) conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin at Belfast. The review took place from 3 to 4 May 2017 and was conducted by a team of 5(eg)-7(e Du)3(bl)6(i)5(n at)-5()-4(B)8s

Key findings

Judgements

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

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.

The QAA review team also provided a commentary on academic standards.

The provider **satisfactorily** manages its responsibilities for academic standards, as set out in contractual arrangements with its academic partners.

Good practice

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

The comprehensive and diverse range of complementary learning opportunities available to students to develop their academic and professional potential (Expectation B4).

Recommendations

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

By September 2017:

formalise and strengthen the procedures for arranging and monitoring placements to ensure that learning opportunities are delivered securely (Expectation B10)
update hyperlinks in student handbooks to ensure that all information is fit for purpose (Expectation C).

By April 2018:

develop further its recently implemented course evaluation process to formally consider a wider range of data and other evidence (Expectation B8).

By June 2018:

apply quality assurance processes more systematically to identify opportunities for enhancement (Enhancement).

Affirmation of action being taken

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

the steps taken to implement and review Counselling and Careers support (Expectation B4).

About the provider

The Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin at Belfast (ISE) is one of three departments located within the Confederal School of Religions, Peace Studies and Theology, Trinity College Dublin (Trinity). ISE has sites in both Dublin and Belfast and this review is concerned with the latter. ISE was originally an independent institute for postgraduate study founded in 1970 but was integrated into Trinity in 2001. Trinity is subject to review and quality assurance under the Institutional Review process of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).

ISE's teaching and research is centred on understanding conflict and the possibilities for peace, reconciliation and dialogue in many different contexts, including the political, the global, the religious and the local. The taught and research programmes attract students from around the world who wish to further their knowledge and careers in these areas.

ISE was subject to a QAA Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight review in April 2013. This had successful outcomes, with Confidence and Reliance judgements, two features of good practice, two advisable recommendations, and two desirable recommendations. In 2014, following the first annual monitoring visit, ISE was deemed to be making 'commendable progress' in implementing the action plan, so was not required to undergo a visit in 2015. In 2016, ISE received an outcome of 'making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision'.

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Explanation of findings

This section explains the review findings in greater detail.

1 Commentary: The provider satisfactorily manages its responsibilities for academic standards, as set out in contractual arrangements with its academic partners

Findings

1.1 The strategic aims of ISE, as a department within the wider Confederal School of Religions, Peace Studies and Theology, are set out in the 2015-19 Confederal School Strategic Plan, which is aligned to Trinity's Strategic Goals. As a department within the Confederal School, the management of academic standards at ISE, including ISE, is governed by Trinity's procedures and regulations, over which the Council exercises oversight. The Council, chaired by the Provost, is responsible for Trinity's academic affairs. The Council has six subcommittees: Quality Committee; Undergraduate Studies Committee; Graduate Studies Committee; Research Committee; International Committee; and the Student Life Committee. The Quality Committee, chaired by the Vice-Provost and Chief Academic Officer, reports to both the Council and College Board and has responsibility for recommending quality policies for approval by the University Council.

1.2

staff and meet the requirements of the non-discriminatory employment practices, to which Trinity is committed through its diversity and inclusion policy. Trinity has in place a Staff

1

The provider satisfactorily manages its responsibilities for academic standards, as set out in contractual arrangements with its academic partners: Summary of findings

1.12 In reaching its conclusion, the review team matched its findings against the three questions specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. The review team found ISE to be assiduous in managing the responsibilities delegated to it by Trinity for maintaining academic standards.

1.13 The review team concludes that ISE **satisfactorily** manages its responsibilities for academic standards, as set out in contractual arrangements with its academic partners.

of students that are transparent, fair and rigorous. They align to the legislative requirements of the Republic of Ireland and the regulations of Trinity. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

provide support for new members of academic staff. In addition, ISE ensures that all staff are appropriately qualified, while staff members are reviewed formally by Trinity on appointment, at the end of their first probationary year, and at the various promotion points.ints. s

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

2.26 ISE engages students in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience in a variety of formal and informal ways. Course handbooks, which are available

changes to reasonable requests made through the various channels.

2.32 ISE is committed to the engagement of students as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience. Effective mechanisms exist for gathering and responding to student feedback, and students feel engaged and listened to. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B7: External Examining*

Findings

2.40 ISE is subject to Trinity'

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

2.54 Students on programmes at ISE are subject to Trinity's processes for academic appeals and student complaints, as set out in the College Calendar. Regulations and procedures governing the academic appeals process for graduate students are outlined in the College Calendar Part 3. A revised Appeals Policy (Academic Progress) was published in February 2017. The new Student Complaints Policy was approved in July 2016 and is available on Trinity's website

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

2.67 The arrangements and procedures for research degrees are set out in the Trinity Calendar and the Graduate Education Policy. Trinity's Supervision of Graduate Students Policy, which sets out a framework for effective research supervision and clarifies the roles and responsibilities of supervisors and research students, has recently been approved. An annual Research Supervisor Development programme is in place. Trinity's Remote Supervision Policy is relevant to students who are required by their research to spend more than 50 per cent of their time outside Ireland for the purposes of research and fieldwork. Procedures governing research degree applications and admission are available on Trinity's website. Information specific to applicants to the PhD programmes offered at ISE is provided on the Course Application Portal. Oversight of research degree applications at Confederal School level is the responsibility of the Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate). This framework would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.68 The review team tested the effectiveness of the various policies and procedures by examining the documentation relating to research degrees. The team also met senior, academic and support staff, and students.

2.69 The evidence showed the policies and procedures to be effective in practice. Postgraduate research students are invited to orientation. ISE hosts an orientation morning in addition to the Dublin-based ISE orientation event and the main Trinity postgraduate orientation programme; students confirmed that these sessions were appropriate. Trinity's regulations are summarised in ISE's Course Handbook provided to research students at the start of their studies; the review team noted that, while handbooks are generally up to date and clear, some of the hyperlinks within this handbook were out of date (see paragraph 3.4).

2.70 Postgraduate research students are supervised according to the standards and guidelines outlined in Trinity's Policy on Good Research Practice, which meets the requirements of the National Framework for Doctoral Education; students were aware of the requirement to meet with their supervisors at least once per month. Probation, progress and continuation procedures follow Trinity regulations and are set out for students in ISE's MLitt and PhD Course Handbook; students confirmed their understanding of these processes.

2.71 Information is provided to students on Trinity's research ethics process and policy. The research degree handbooks explain the procedures that all students must follow to obtain research ethics clearance and students were clear about how the process operated.

2.72 Procedures governing the submission and examination of theses are set out in the ISE MLitt and PhD Handbook. While students were generally clear about what is expected of them in relation to the examination process, they commented that certain aspects of the procedures could have been more transparent.

2.73 Postgraduate research students are encouraged to present their work at international conferences; this is supported by a Trinity bursary scheme under which ISE

also commits to provide a proportion of the costs; staff and students at ISE were unclear about the funding available. The CAPSL provides a range of courses to support researchers. All Trinity PhDs are structured courses in which 10-30 ECTS must be taken from taught modules; modules appropriate to a student's field of study, research skills or career development are identified by the student in consultation with their supervisor.

2.74 ISE is subject to Trinity's regulatory framework in relation to postgraduate research degrees. This ensures that the standards of research degrees are secure and the support available to postgraduate research students is appropriate. 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 st

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

3.5 On completion of their studies, students are provided with a transcript; responsibility for providing transcripts currently rests with individual departments. For ISE, these are produced by the School Executive Office and signed off by the Course Coordinator.

3.6 In line with Trinity policy, several enhancements are planned to the information provided to students including plans for the development of document repositories for registered students and 'frequency asked questions' for the Confederal School website.

3.7 Policies and procedures are in place for the management of information. Website and paper-based information is comprehensive and generally accurate, although student handbooks contain a small number of out-of-date hyperlinks, which the review team has recommended should be addressed. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

opportunities might be enhanced. This resulted in the recommendation in paragraph 2.51 for ISE to develop further its recently implemented course evaluation process to consider formally a wider range of data and other evidence. The review team **recommends** that, by June 2018, ISE applies quality assurance processes more systematically to identify opportunities for enhancement.

4.6 ISE provision is also aligned to the priority Information Technology Strategy and Online Education Project, which continue to enhance online communications. ISE has developed its use of the VLE, online communications technology, and social media platforms. The increased use of technology-enhanced learning within the teaching environment permits enhancement of the student experience. These developments were acknowledged by students. During the academic year 2015-16, the Academic Registry completed an enhancement programme resulting in a range of measures and service commitments, including the embedding of the Student Information Technology Services software. This provides students with an individual online student record incorporating application, fee payment, registration, timetable, course and module information, and results, thus enhancing and supporting transitions throughout the student life cycle.

4.7 Good practice is shared, both formally and informally, within ISE and across the wider School, Faculty and Trinity. The encouragement of the sharing of good practice in research links directly to the Trinity Strategic Plan. The annual Faculty Quality R

The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.9 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. The Expectation for this judgement area is met but the associated level of risk is moderate.

4.10 The review team makes one recommendation: to apply quality assurance processes more systematically to identify opportunities for enhancement.

4.11 There are no affirmations or good practice identified in this judgement area.

4.12 The moderate risk in the enhancement of student learning opportunities refers to some shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which quality assurance procedures are applied.

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

Glossary

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

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

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

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 Fra*

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