

Gateway Quality Review: Wales Union Foundation (Union School of Theology)

May 2022

Key findings

QAA's judgements about Union Foundation

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at Union Foundation:

There can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable.

There can be confidence that the quality of the student academic experience meets relevant baseline regulatory requirements.

About this review

The review visit took place from 24 to 25 May 2022 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

Dr John Deane
Mrs Alison Jones
Mr Matthew Kitching (Student Reviewer).

The overall aim of Gateway Quality Review: Wales is to:

provide the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales with an expert judgement about the readiness of a provider to enter, or continue to operate within, the higher

Core practice: The provider ensures that students who are awarded qualifications have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers.

5 UST programmes are approved and reviewed through the quality assurance processes of its awarding body which ensures that they are positioned at the appropriate level of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). Programme information articulates the relevant learning outcomes to be achieved at each level which are mapped against assessment criteria. Level-related marking criteria reflect the FHEQ and comply with the regulations of the awarding body.

6 UST external examiners comment in their annual reports on whether the standards set are appropriate for the award, or award element, by reference to any agreed subject benchmarks, qualifications framework, programme specification or other relevant information.

Core practice: Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the standards of its awards are credible and secure irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them.

UST Learning Communities that deliver programmes by flexible and distributed learning are approved by UST's Academic Board that includes representation from the awarding body. UST retains responsibility for all teaching and assessment; a UST link tutor is appointed and supported by lead mentors selected within the Learning Communities to facilitate learning. A detailed checklist for Learning Communities, including facilities and learning opportunities, is reviewed by the OU academic reviewer. A Learning Communities Review Protocol sets out requirements of link tutors and monitoring requirements that include an annual report. Since 2020, UST has undertaken online observations of Learning Communities every year to check on standards.

8 Placements are conducted in partnership with local placement providers, many of whom are local churches, which are risk assessed. The Pastoral Dean maintains oversight of placement supervision and assessment, and all supervisors are inducted and trained. Students confirmed that they were well supported while on placements which were structured to ensure their relevance to expected future employment and reflected their career aspirations. An interview with their placement supervisors and tutors enabled them to feed back to UST on their placement experience. The Review team concluded that UST, working closely with its awarding body, has effective arrangements in place to ensure that standards of the awards are credible and secure irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them.

Core practice: The provider uses external expertise, assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent.

9 UST makes effective use of external reference points and draws upon independent and expert advice in the setting and maintenance of standards. It actively engages with external examiners, employers, industry representatives and its awarding body, and responds to feedback within its quality assurance processes. Current external examiners include two from a higher education institution and one from a leading theological college. They are involved in the assessment and classification processes and provide feedback to confirm that quality and fairness exist in the assessment process. Comments made within annual reports are discussed and recorded by the Board of Examiners and awards are

Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

The Core and Common practices of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code)

Core practice: The provider has a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system.

14 UST has an Admissions Policy which, it informed the team, was revised in May 2021 and again in October 2021. The policy is available on the School's website and is overseen by the Academic Board. The policy is comprehensive and, among other things, covers responsibilities, selection criteria, applications from mature and international students, and the appeal process. The team found that the revised October 2021 version of the Admissions Policy was not publicly available at the time of the review. The team was informed that this was due to staff illness and was rectified during the review visit. The team found that there is currently no systematic approach to monitor the ongoing accuracy of published information. However, students met by the team stated that they were given comprehensive information at application and any queries were quickly answered by staff. The School also has a Recognition of Prior Learning Policy and Admissions Complaints and Appeals Policy and Procedure.

15 The approach to recruitment, selection and admission is informed by its commitment to 'rigorous, biblical and accessible education, training and resources for churches worldwide'. Selection criteria include an applicant's prior academic performance, the potential to engage in academic theological study, English language proficiency and their understanding and acceptance of the School's aims and ethos. Individual programmes also have specific criteria - for instance, applicants to the MTh Theology are required to have a minimum of a lower second-class honours degree in theology or a related discipline.

16 Prospective students submit applications online, directly to UST. These are processed initially by the Admissions Department and then evaluated by the Programme Leader who invites students to attend an interview; both stages require the completion of a checklist. An overview spreadsheet of enquiries and applications is maintained. The spreadsheet includes the programme applied for, whether references (including church references) are required, interview dates and outcomes, and whether they have received relevant mailshots. Students informed the team that entry criteria were clear, and the team found the admissions process to be accessible and fair.

17 In September 2021, the MTh Programme Committee discussed admissions arrangements for non-standard entries to the programme and was in the process of composing an exam. During the review the institution informed the team that, owing to a change of institutional leadership, it had decided that this exam was unnecessary. Each application is considered individually to ensure fairness and inclusivity, and reflects the nature of many applicants.

Core practice: The provider designs and/or delivers high-quality courses.

18 UST follows OU procedures and undergoes a revalidation, that considers institutional and programme structures, including delivery, every five years. The School has significant scope, within the confines of the validation agreement, to contextualise the programme and ensure it aligns with its own ethos, needs and approach. Within this approach, the School develops new module specifications and engages in extensive dialogue with OU staff throughout the process. External examiners are also closely involved

Core practice: Where the provider offers research degrees, it delivers these in appropriate and supportive research environments.

followed. An annual Learning Community Review is also conducted to monitor delivery of the programme. The team found that a clear quality assurance cycle is in place and well understood by staff across the institution although some actions do not appear to be signed off in a clear and timely manner.

Common practice: The provider's approach to managing quality takes account of external expertise.

35 UST includes external representation on key committees, including the Academic Board and Quality Assurance Committee. The institution also has external examiners in place for its programmes. External examiner reports viewed by the team confirm that standards are appropriate for the awards and meet relevant external benchmarks. The reports also confirm that students' work is of an appropriate quality and assessment demonstrates that they meet the learning outcomes. Upon receipt, external examiner reports are considered by programme teams and responses overseen by the Examination Board.

Judgement

38 The review team examined all evidence provided and had meetings with senior staff, academic and support staff, and current students. UST programmes are aligned to