Free Church of Scotland College

Review for Educational Oversight by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

September 2012

Key findings about Free Church of Scotland College

As a result of its Review for Educational Oversight carried out in September 2012, the QAA review team (the team) considers that there can be **confidence** in how the provider manages its stated responsibilities for the standards of the awards it offers on behalf of the University of Glasgow.

The team also considers that there can be **confidence** in how the provider manages its stated responsibilities for the quality and enhancement of the learning opportunities it offers on behalf of this awarding body.

The team considers that **reliance can** be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the provider is responsible for publishing about itself and the programmes it delivers.

Good practice

The team has identified the following **good practice**:

- the mutually supportive working relationship with the University of Glasgow (paragraph 1.3)
- strong student representation supported by mentoring from senior staff (paragraphs 1.6 and 2.7)
- the effective reflection on and use of information provided by external examiners (paragraph 1.10)
- teaching enhanced by staff research and vocational experience (paragraph 2.9)
- the comprehensive and effective mechanisms in place to manage public information (paragraphs 3.2 and 3.3).

Recommendations

The team has also identified a number of **recommendations** for the enhancement of the higher education provision.

The team considers that it would be **desirable** for the provider to:

- implement a more formal, proactive and systematic approach to the provision of English language support for overseas students (paragraph 2.8)
- introduce a formal and strategic approach to pedagogic staff development (paragraph 2.10).

About this report

This report presents the findings of the [Review for Educational Oversight](#)[1] (REO) conducted by [QAA](#) at the Free Church of Scotland College (the provider; the College). The purpose of the review is to provide public information about how the provider discharges its stated responsibilities for the management and delivery of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students. The review applies to programmes of study that the provider delivers on behalf of the University of Glasgow (the University). The review was carried out by Dr Gillian Blunden and Mr Dan Morgan (reviewers), and Mr Grant Horsburgh (coordinator).

The review team conducted the review in agreement with the provider and in accordance with the [*Review for Educational Oversight: Handbook*](#).[2] Evidence in support of the review included a comprehensive package of information to support a self-evaluation document written to inform the review, a student written submission, information gathered during a meeting with a representative sample of current students and meetings with staff and awarding body representatives.

The review team also considered the provider's use of the relevant external reference points:

- the Academic Infrastructure
- the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

Please note that if you are unfamiliar with any of the terms used in this report you can find them in the [Glossary](#).

The Free Church of Scotland College (the College) is an integral part of the ministry of the Free Church of Scotland and is a registered charity. The College has been in existence since the formation of the Church in 1843 and has occupied its current site in a nineteenth-century building in central Edinburgh since 1905. The College operates under the oversight of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland. All full-time members of teaching staff are ordained ministers of the Church, appointed to their posts by the General Assembly. The General Assembly provided the College with its constitution and updates these arrangements on a regular basis. The College Principal presents an annual report to the General Assembly. However, most of the day-to-day activities of the College are conducted in liaison with three Church committees: the Board of Ministry, the College Board and the Board of Trustees.

In 2001, the College became a partner institution of the University, which led to the validation and approval of the higher education provision within the scope of this review. The College employs four full-time teaching staff and a College Secretary. The College mission statement notes that the main purpose of the College is 'to serve the Free Church of Scotland by providing effective theological education and vocational training for its ministers, missionaries and evangelists'. In addition, the College aims to extend learning opportunities to 'those preparing for ministry in other churches', 'to share our Scottish theological heritage with students from overseas and to gain enrichment by their insights', and 'to promote rigorous and reverent Christian scholarship, matching the academic standards of the ancient Scottish universities'. A total of 26 students were enrolled at the College at the time of the review, of which five were from overseas.

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[1] www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/tier-4.
[2] www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/reo-handbook.aspx.

At the time of the review, the provider offered the following higher education programmes, listed beneath their awarding body, with the number of full-time equivalent students shown in brackets:

University of Glasgow
- Bachelor of Theology (19)
- Master of Theology (by research) (2)
- Master of Theology in Scottish Church History and Theology (taught) (3)

The provider's stated responsibilities

The College has responsibility for the management of academic standards, and for the maintenance of the quality of learning opportunities, as approved by the awarding body at the point of validation. The College has responsibility for reporting on the maintenance of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities through annual monitoring. This is exercised through the College Senate which receives monitoring reports from the Board of Studies for each programme. Responsibility for published information relating to higher education programmes rests with the College and all information is checked by the College Secretary prior to publication. Where appropriate, the College liaises effectively with the awarding body prior to publishing information which refers to the University.

Recent developments

The Master of Theology in Scottish Church History and Theology was introduced in 2010, with the first student graduating with distinction in 2011. The College continues to invest in its information technology infrastructure with the recent addition of interactive conferencing and media facilities to support students in their studies. The College has a rolling programme of refurbishment of the building. A student study area, upgraded in time for the start of academic year 2012-13, provides students with access to bookable high-quality desktop computing facilities, access points for laptop computers in an appropriate study environment. The study area also contains part of the College's extensive and comprehensive collection of texts. A newly appointed member of the teaching team has been provided with a newly refurbished office, which includes facilities to meet students individually.

Students' contribution to the review

Students studying on higher education programmes at the provider were invited to present a submission to the review team. The President of the Student Representative Council provided a description of the mechanisms in place to encourage students to engage with the enhancement of the learning experience. The written submission had been discussed and agreed with a group of undergraduate students prior to being submitted to the team. During the visit, the team met a representative sample of five undergraduate students. Views expressed by students during the meeting reflected those contained in the written submission. The submission and the meeting students were effective in enabling students to contribute to this review.

Detailed findings about the Free Church of Scotland College

1 Academic standards

How effectively does the provider fulfil its responsibilities for the management of academic standards?

1.1 The College fulfils its responsibilities for the management of academic standards effectively. It forms an integral part of the ministry of the Free Church of Scotland and is recognised for the training provided for ministers of the Free Church, although private students have outnumbered the Free Church-sponsored students for a number of years. The College also offers non-validated courses, which are not the subject of this review.

1.2 College and University responsibilities for the management of academic standards are clearly set out in a signed memorandum of agreement. College academic staff are fully aware of their responsibilities and are able to articulate them clearly. The University retains responsibility for the oversight and monitoring of academic quality, together with the second marking and moderation of student assessed work through University-appointed external examiners. The College, subject to the overall requirements of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, is responsible for all aspects of operational delivery. Non-academic aspects of the College's organisation are the responsibility of the College Board on which the President of the Student Representative Council sits. Shared responsibilities for the assurance and enhancement of academic standards include: identifying curriculum needs and the strategic development of the College's higher education portfolio; assessment setting and monitoring of student performance; reviewing and responding to annual monitoring reviews and course evaluations; student appeals and acting upon feedback from students. College academic staff hold associate staff status at the University.

1.3 There is a strong mutually supportive relationship between the College and the University that contributes effectively to the management of academic standards and is an example of good practice. Examples include: sharing of teaching staff to deliver sessions and act as dissertation supervisors and external examiners, a joint academic management committee (the Joint Board), and University representation by a senior academic from the subject area on key College committees.

1.4 The College operates effectively under the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland. Ownership and management of the premises is vested in the Board of Trustees of the Church. The Board of Ministry of the Free Church is responsible for the selection of candidates for the ministry and for monitoring the progress of their studies. The College's programmes are managed primarily through the College Senate, consisting of all full-time professors appointed to the College by the General Assembly. The Senate, convened by the Principal, is responsible, in liaison with the University in respect of the validated programmes, for providing the teaching required and for the maintenance of academic standards. The College Board of Studies meets twice a year, with membership of Senate, all teaching staff, student representatives and a representative from the awarding body. Reporting to the Senate, the Board of Studies is responsible for the day-to-day running of the programmes. It scrutinises College performance through analysis of student questionnaires, which are prepared by course leaders and validated by student representatives.

1.5 There is also an effective Joint Board, representing both the College and the University. Chaired by the Clerk of Senate of the University, the Board oversees the

validated programmes offered by the College, receives and discusses the Principal's report and those of the external examiners. Action points are identified and followed up through meeting minutes.

1.6   The College achieves effective oversight of academic standards through student questionnaires and the annual professorial reports of each course, which include analysis of assessment results. Questionnaires and reports are considered at the College's Board of Studies. Action points are followed up at subsequent meetings. There is an active Student Representative Council which meets once a trimester. Student representatives validate reports of student feedback prepared by course leaders and students sit on a number of College committees. Minutes are displayed in the student common room. Student representatives, including the President, are briefed on their role by the Principal and mentored by more experienced student representatives before assuming the role. The strong student representation and involvement in the maintenance of academic standards is an example of good practice.

How effectively are external reference points used in the management of academic standards?

1.7   The College makes appropriate use of a number of external reference points to maintain and enhance academic standards. For example, it uses subject benchmark statements in its validation and review documentation, external examiners appointed by the awarding body, participation in University periodic reviews and theological oversight from the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland.

1.8   The College is subject to a process of quinquennial review by a review committee of the Free Church. This process offers a challenging scrutiny of the curriculum and operations of the College and allows for external opinions to be considered. The College was further approved by a review committee in 2012 to provide training for the Free Church Ministry. The report from this review indicates that all aspects relating to the management of academic standards through the committee structure are properly conducted. However, the review identified the allocation of personal tutors to students and the supervision and assessing of the second practical placement as areas for development. The Church Board of Ministry has overall responsibility for these matters, while academic staff implement the required action. Discussions with staff indicated that both matters were now being considered and acted upon appropriately through the committee structure and that a new mentoring system for students had been introduced. Students indicated that in their view appropriate and effective personal tutoring arrangements were already in place and that progress in addressing both matters was being monitored by the Joint Board of Studies.

1.9   The University revalidates its partnership agreement with the College and its degree programmes associated with the agreement on a six-yearly basis. The next review is scheduled to take place during academic year 2012-13. Validation documents and the partnership agreement make full reference to the provisions of the Academic Infrastructure, including programme specifications, the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, subject benchmark statements and the Scottish Qualifications and Credit Framework. This is demonstrated explicitly in the relatively recent validation of the taught master's programme. Student appeals and formal complaints are covered by the awarding body's procedures, and the College has designated a disability officer. The College uses the University's Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme for admission to the undergraduate degree programme with recognised prior learning up to a maximum of 120 credits.

How does the provider use external moderation, verification or examining to assure academic standards?

1.10   The College uses a thorough external examining system to assure and enhance academic standards. External examiners are appointed by the University and the College appreciates the interaction with them. Their role includes acting as second marker for all student assessed work, attending the Board of Examiners, scrutinising assessed work, assuring the academic standards of assessments, and submitting individual annual reports to the awarding body. The College and University jointly consider external examiners' recommendations and informally draw up responses to them at the examination board and subsequently at the Joint Board and the College Board of Studies. External examiners report that the College is responsive to items raised in their reports, which are intended to maintain and enhance academic standards. This very close involvement of external examiners in the support of the College to assure academic standards is an example of good practice. Particular features of good practice include whole cohort second marking and the effective reflection on and use of information provided by external examiners.

1.11   The College acknowledged that further enhancement of academic standards across programmes as a whole might be served by a more holistic consideration of programme progression and achievement data. Discussions with College and University representatives indicated that in the light of the small numbers of students involved, consideration might be given to a five-year rolling analysis. A number of teaching staff are external examiners at other organisations, thereby enabling the sharing of sector-wide good practice in the maintenance and enhancement of academic standards.

1.12   The College adheres consistently to the University's assessment regulations, with some specific adaptations to the University's scheme in respect of language papers. Practical placements for Free Church of Scotland ministerial candidates are out-with the University's assessment scheme, but carried out in accordance with the requirements of the Free Church General Assembly. Internal verification, first marking, and the provision of assessment feedback to students are the responsibility of the College. Assessed tasks and feedback on performance are clearly related to course intended learning outcomes.

> The review team has **confidence** in the provider's management of its responsibilities for the standards of the awards it offers on behalf of its awarding body.

2   Quality of learning opportunities

How effectively does the provider fulfil its responsibilities for managing and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities?

2.1   The comprehensive self-evaluation documentation and discussions with staff and students indicate that the College is fulfilling its responsibilities for managing and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities. The committees and management structure, discussed in paragraphs 1.1 to 1.6, apply equally to the management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities. The College works closely with the University through implementing the memorandum of agreement and with the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland to ensure it delivers effectively its responsibilities in respect to the quality of learning opportunities.

How effectively are external reference points used in the management and enhancement of learning opportunities?

2.2   The College's use of external reference points, discussed in paragraphs 1.7 to 1.9, applies equally to its use in the management and enhancement of learning opportunities. The College provides three unique higher education programmes that follow a prescribed curriculum reflecting the 'course followed by a candidate for the ministry at a traditional Scottish divinity hall'. The curriculum is informed by the guidance of the General Assembly and relevant subject benchmark statements. Any changes to the curriculum are governed by the memorandum of agreement.

How does the provider assure itself that the quality of teaching and learning is being maintained and enhanced?

2.3   Each programme completes an annual course monitoring report and these are discussed at the November Board of Studies meeting. The reports provide an opportunity to gauge the quality of the overall course through reflection on the external examiner's report, analysis of the performance statistics and commentary from the Programme Leader. Annual course monitoring reports are discussed in detail at the Board of Studies, where necessary actions are taken, and reported at the Joint Board of Studies, which includes representation from the University. A student satisfaction survey elicits comments from students, concentrating primarily upon the physical experience of the students while at the College and is the preserve of the College Board.

2.4   Importantly, a general qualitative questionnaire for each module is distributed during a relevant teaching session to increase the return. The outcomes from questionnaires are collated and reported to the Board of Studies. Although there is variability in the evaluative content of the general qualitative questionnaires, it is evident that any substantial matters are raised at the Board of Studies where there is student input into the proposed resolution. As an additional means of ensuring that students are informed of the outcome of concerns raised by them in the general qualitative questionnaire, Board of Studies minutes are formally posted in the student common room.

How does the provider assure itself that students are supported effectively?

2.5   There is substantial evidence of comprehensive written materials to support students in their studies. All students receive an annually-updated student handbook that contains comprehensive information pertinent to their course of study and the life of a student at the College. Students also receive a programme handbook and a course handbook, which give detailed information on learning and assessment. These documents are explained during a two-day induction programme undertaken by all students.

2.6   Prior to entry to the course, all students are interviewed to determine their suitability and to ensure that their career ambitions can be supported. At the beginning of each academic session, the Principal discusses each student's course with them, and progress is jointly monitored throughout the year, particularly at the January meeting of the Senate. Class sizes are small and students receive a minimum amount of class contact time of between 12 and 16 hours per week. As noted in paragraph 1.8, a new mentoring system for students has been introduced as a consequence of student representation at the quinquennial review.

2.7   Alongside the open and supportive atmosphere engendered by communal morning and lunchtime breaks and daily prayers, the College ensures that there is substantial student representation to support the views of students in the College committee structure. As noted

in Section 1, there is representation on the College Board, Board of Studies and Joint Board of Studies, with students also contributing to the quinquennial review. The Student Representative Council is well established and functions effectively.

2.8   A number of students do not have English as their first language and the College recognises that their performance can be impaired by weaker language skills. Spoken English tends to be more of a problem than written English skills and the College has implemented a number of support methods for assessment in line with the University, which also has facilities for supporting English skills. The College has also, over a period of time, introduced a number of ways to provide students with additional support. For example, all overseas students are made aware of and encouraged to take up support on an individual basis. In accordance with University guidelines, extensions to examination times and to coursework submission times are available for non-native English speaking students. In the past, a foreign language speaker has supported students with difficulties in English. While the College continually monitors students' English language skills to identify where support is required for individual students, it is considered desirable that the College considers implementing a more formal, proactive and systematic approach to the provision of English language support for overseas students as a means of enhancing their performance and experience on the course.

What are the provider's arrangements for staff development to maintain and/or enhance the quality of learning opportunities?

2.9   There are four well qualified full-time teaching staff and six part-time. The academic year provides opportunities for staff to engage in research and scholarly activity. There is evidence of considerable vocational engagement in the ministry of the Church by staff that supports subject knowledge. This activity extends to considerable contributions to national Church meetings, authorship of vocational publications, as well as substantial contributions to the wider subject community. Recently appointed academic staff were given the opportunity to work with the College to become familiar with the ethos and culture of the College prior to being invited to apply for a vacant post. On appointment, new staff undertake a structured and effective induction within the College and with the University. This considered and supportive approach to staff appointment and induction makes a substantial contribution to the collegial atmosphere among the teaching staff which students noted as being a positive feature of the College learning experience. Teaching is enhanced by staff research and vocational experience, and the considerable extent and depth of the teaching staff vocational expertise and academic contribution is recognised as an important asset to the student learning experience and is considered as good practice.

2.10   The College takes advantage of opportunities for pedagogic development that the University offers. The College is embracing a number of new electronic teaching, learning and assessment technologies and these are beginning to be adopted by the teaching staff. These developments are welcomed by students in support of their learning. However, the College does not have a systematic approach to staff development, which has tended to lead to activities being undertaken on a case-by-case basis. The small number of teaching staff means that the College does not have a systematic and formal staff appraisal and development scheme, nor a formal mechanism to monitor and enhance the quality of teaching. Discussions with staff and the University representative indicate that this has been recognised and is likely to be considered as part of the planned revalidation. It is considered desirable for the College to work with the University to explore the feasibility of developing and introducing a formal and strategic approach to pedagogic staff development, formal staff appraisal and a formal mechanism to monitor and enhance the quality of teaching.

How effectively does the provider ensure that learning resources are accessible to students and sufficient to enable them to achieve the learning outcomes?

2.11   The College has an appropriate set of teaching and staff rooms to support student learning adequately. There is also a large hall for meetings and examinations. The students' common room is supplemented by a study room and three computer study rooms. Students are also free to use classrooms, when no classes are taking place, to allow access to the extensive library facilities which are distributed by subject area around the classrooms. The College's extensive computing, printing and photocopying facilities are available to students.

2.12   The library stock is catalogued and distributed around the teaching rooms. There is an extensive and comprehensive stock of texts, which is supported by an annual budget divided between the subject areas. Each member of staff is responsible for ensuring that a particular subject is sufficiently resourced and the overall management of the library is overseen by a member of the Senate. There are excellent facilities for research with a comprehensive journals section. Students have access to a nearby theological library, which has extended opening hours.

2.13   A computer room allows students access to a set of learning resources with arrangements in place to provide access to other libraries throughout the world. To support presentation skills, students regularly have their sermons filmed for staff and peer feedback purposes. Investment in information technology resources has been carried out on a regular basis. The College has recently introduced a virtual learning environment to support student learning, and, while its use by staff is not yet fully operational, it has been well received by students.

The review team has **confidence** that the provider is fulfilling its responsibilities for managing and enhancing the quality of the intended learning opportunities it provides for students.

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3   Public information

How effectively does the provider's public information communicate to students and other stakeholders about the higher education it provides?

3.1   The College communicates its public information effectively to students and other stakeholders. Public information is published on the College website, which provides extensive detail of the higher education provision on offer, as well as information relevant to the College. Of the range of printed material provided, the student, programme and course handbooks are regarded as particularly useful documents by students.

How effective are the provider's arrangements for assuring the accuracy and completeness of information it has responsibility for publishing?

3.2   The College has effective arrangements for ensuring the accuracy and completeness of public information relating to its higher education programmes. Student, programme and course handbooks are revised and updated annually by the relevant programme organisers. Amendments are considered in draft by all academic staff, checked by the College Secretary, audited by the University, and issued to all students for comment. Immediate updates are notified to students electronically. However, discrepancies were

noted between the advice given to students regarding academic referencing in their own work and the format of the bibliographies provided in the handbooks. Discussions with staff indicated that the College would review the presentation of bibliographies provided in the handbooks in the interests of consistency and the modelling of good practice.

3.3   Electronic and printed marketing materials are prepared by the College webmaster, a former information technology professional who is now a member of the teaching staff. Material is checked by the College Secretary and other academic staff, and approved by the Joint Board, which includes representatives from the University, to ensure accuracy. Feedback from students is used to update and enhance the information where necessary and students report finding the pre and on-course information provided by the College to be extremely helpful. The comprehensive nature of all the public information, its quality and accuracy, and the stringency of the methods to ensure it is up to date, complete and accurate are an example of good practice.

The team concludes that **reliance can be placed** on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the provider is responsible for publishing about itself and the programmes it delivers.

Action plan[3]

Free Church of Scotland College action plan relating to the Review for Educational Oversight September 2012						
Good practice	Action to be taken	Target date	Action by	Success indicators	Reported to	Evaluation
The review team identified the following areas of **good practice** that are worthy of wider dissemination within the provider:						
• the mutually supportive working relationship with the University of Glasgow (paragraph 1.3)	Continue to foster the existing good relationship by continued liaison with University of Glasgow personnel	End of academic session 2012-13	All professorial staff	Feedback from the Joint Board	Joint Board	Continue to maintain through internal monitoring processes
• strong student representation supported by mentoring from senior staff (paragraphs 1.6 and 2.7)	All students are members of the Student Representative Committee The president of this Committee is an ex officio member of the College Board and the Joint Board Three undergraduate students (one from					

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[3] The provider has been required to develop this action plan to follow up on good practice and address any recommendations arising from the review. QAA monitors progress against the action plan, in conjunction with the provider's awarding body.

	first, second and final year) and one postgraduate student, serve on the Board of Studies	End of each academic session	All professorial staff and student representatives	Good input from student representatives All concerns aired and necessary action taken	Board of Studies College Board Joint Board	Continue to maintain this representation
	A Director of Studies appointed for each student year	End of each Academic session	Professorial staff	Good relationship with students at a one-to-one level	Senate	Feedback from student annual surveys
• the effective reflection on and use of information provided by external examiners (paragraph 1.10)	External examiners reports discussed at the Board of Studies meeting Intend to reflect more at College Senate level	End of each academic session	All professorial staff	Reports analysed at teaching staff level and any action implemented	Board of Studies Senate meetings	Work in progress
• teaching enhanced by staff research and vocational experience (paragraph 2.9)	Induction procedure in place with University of Glasgow when a new professor appointed	When a vacancy arises	Appointed Professor	Good awareness of procedures at the University of Glasgow	Senate	At the appointment of new professor
• the comprehensive and effective mechanisms in place	Review of bibliographies in class handbooks to	End of Academic Session	Course Coordinator for each subject	2012-13 Class handbook bibliographies will	Principal	Work in progress

to manage public information (paragraphs 3.2 and 3.3).	conform to that in Student Handbook	2012-13	area	conform to those in the Student Handbook		
Desirable	**Action to be taken**	**Target date**	**Action by**	**Success indicators**	**Reported to**	**Evaluation**
The team considers that it is **desirable** for the provider to:						
• implement a more formal, proactive and systematic approach to the provision of English language support for overseas students (paragraph 2.8)	Interview at start of course to assess a student's facility in theological English and ability to understand it when spoken (as opposed to written texts)	End of academic session 2012-13	Principal	Good communication Better understanding of what is being taught so increased exam marks	Senate	Internal monitoring processes
• introduce a formal and strategic approach to pedagogic staff development (paragraph 2.10).	Discussion with University during revalidation in December 2012	December 2012	Awaiting outcome of discussions with University	Good professional development	Senate	Work in progress

About QAA

QAA is the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. QAA's mission is to safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK higher education.

QAA's aims are to:

- meet students' needs and be valued by them
- safeguard standards in an increasingly diverse UK and international context
- drive improvements in UK higher education
- improve public understanding of higher education standards and quality.

QAA conducts reviews of higher education institutions and publishes reports on the findings. QAA also publishes a range of guidance documents to help safeguard standards and improve quality.

More information about the work of QAA is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk.

More detail about Review for Educational Oversight can be found at: www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/tier-4.

Glossary

This glossary explains terms used in this report. You can find a fuller glossary at: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary. Formal definitions of key terms can be found in the *Review for Educational Oversight: Handbook*[4]

Academic Infrastructure Guidance developed and agreed by the higher education community and published by QAA, which is used by institutions to ensure that their courses meet national expectations for academic standards and that students have access to a suitable environment for learning (academic quality). It consists of four groups of reference points: the **frameworks for higher education qualifications**, the **subject benchmark statements**, the **programme specifications** and the **Code of practice**. Work is underway (2011-12) to revise the Academic Infrastructure as the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

academic quality A comprehensive term referring to how, and how well, institutions manage teaching and learning opportunities to help students progress and succeed.

academic standards The standards set and maintained by institutions for their courses and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

awarding body A body with the authority to award academic qualifications located on the **framework for higher education qualifications**, such as diplomas or degrees.

awarding organisation An organisation with the authority to award academic qualifications located on the Qualifications and Credit Framework for England and Northern Ireland (these qualifications are at levels 1 to 8, with levels 4 and above being classed as 'higher education').

Code of practice *The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, published by QAA: a set of interrelated documents giving guidance for higher education institutions.

designated body An organisation that has been formally appointed to perform a particular function.

differentiated judgements In a Review for Educational Oversight, separate judgements respectively for the provision validated by separate awarding bodies.

enhancement Taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of **learning opportunities**. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

feature of good practice A positive aspect of the way a higher education institution manages quality and standards, which may be seen as exemplary to others.

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:

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[4] www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/reo-handbook.aspx.

The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) and *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland.*

highly trusted sponsor An education provider that the UK government trusts to admit migrant students from overseas, according to Tier 4 of the UK Border Agency's points-based immigration system. Higher education providers wishing to obtain this status must undergo a successful review by QAA.

learning opportunities The provision made for students' learning, including planned **programmes of study**, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios) and staff development.

learning outcome What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

operational definition A formal definition of a term, which establishes exactly what QAA means when using it in reports.

programme (of study) An approved course of study which 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.

provider An institution that offers courses of higher education, typically on behalf of a separate **awarding body or organisation**. In the context of REO, the term means an independent college.

public information Information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

reference points Statements and other publications that establish criteria against which performance can be measured. Internal reference points may be used by providers for purposes of self-regulation; external ones are used and accepted throughout the higher education community for the checking of standards and quality.

quality See **academic quality**.

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.

threshold academic standard The minimum standard that a student should reach in order to gain a particular qualification or award, as set out in the **subject benchmark statements** and national qualifications frameworks. Threshold standards are distinct from the standards of performance that students need to achieve in order to gain any particular class of award, for example a first-class bachelor's degree. See also **academic standard**.

widening participation Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.

All QAA's publications are available on our website www.qaa.ac.uk