



NEWS FOCUS - Claim that QUB will not admit new students to Union Theological College.

BBC News NI Education Correspondent, Robbie Meredith, reported yesterday evening that QUB will not admit new students to Union Theological College. Union College has responded. Read both reports here.

1. BBC News NI report

BBC News NI Education Correspondent, Robbie Meredith,, reported yesterday evening that : Queen's University will not admit any new undergraduate theology students to the Presbyterian-run Union Theological College (UTC) in 2019.

The BBC NI report continues - The move was recommended in a [university review](#) that was critical of aspects of teaching and staffing at the college.

UTC is run by the Presbyterian Church.

December 19, 2018

It trains some students for the ministry, but also educates more than 150 QUB theology students.

- [Queen's to review theological college link](#)
- [A theological brexit?](#)

A spokesperson for UTC was strongly critical of the university's decision.

In July, BBC News NI revealed that [Queen's University was to conduct a comprehensive review](#) of its relationship with the college.

It is understood that the review panel included both Queen's academics and a theologian from another university.

'Not sustainable'

The panel's report outlines a number of criticisms of academic practice at UTC.

"The undergraduate curriculum in theology, however diverse the subject matter, is taught almost entirely from a particular theological and religious perspective," the report said.

It also said that all full-time teaching staff "are male and predominantly from a Presbyterian background".

"A single denomination providing all the undergraduate theology provision for a research-based university is highly problematic and not sustainable in today's post-conflict Northern Ireland," the report concluded.

It also said that the college had no action plan to address the lack of full-time female teaching staff and that there was a "lack of diversity in staffing and the curriculum".

December 19, 2018

"The university should not permit an intake to the undergraduate programmes in September 2019," the report said.

"Therefore, admission to the undergraduate programmes will be suspended."

The latest report follows a previous review carried out by the university in 2016 that made some similar criticisms.

Only prospective Queen's theology undergraduates due to start courses of study in 2019 are affected by the student recruitment freeze.

Current QUB theology students will continue their studies, as will around 30 students in the college being educated by the Presbyterian Church.

In a statement, QUB said that it would consider the implications of the review for the longer term future of theology at the university.

College criticises freeze decision

The university also said that it was committed to ensuring that issues raised by the review were addressed, and that it would contact students who had applied to study theology in 2019 to help them find alternative degree courses.

However, a spokesperson for Union Theological College said they "very much regret and are disappointed" by the university's decision.

"The recommendations of this latest review in effect belittles the oversight of external examiners from prestigious UK universities and the effectiveness of the university's own quality assurance processes," they said.

December 19, 2018

"Some of the recommendations of this current 2018 review panel are very speculative and totally unsubstantiated.

"The review infers that a lack of diversity in the college staff and variable staff profiles has the potential to impact negatively on the student experience.

"These conclusions have no basis in fact and are not supported by student testimonials or the university's own monitoring procedures over many years," the spokesperson said.

"Is the real issue that there is no place for a Christian college linked to the Queen's University of today?

"Union College will consider its formal response to the review and will continue to support, academically and pastorally, our students who have embarked on their studies."

2. Union Theological College response to QUB review

Union Theological College has responded to the findings of the recent review by Queen's University, Belfast of its Institute of Theology. This has resulted in the University suspending undergraduate programmes for the forthcoming 2019-2020 academic year and will have a major impact on student numbers at Union College. The College believes that some of the findings of the review are 'very speculative and totally unsubstantiated'.

December 19, 2018

A spokesperson for Union Theological College said:

We very much regret and are disappointed by the decision taken by Queen's University today (18 December), which will mean that, for September 2019, school-leavers wishing to study Theology at the highest academic level will no longer be able to enrol at Queen's.

Along with other denominational theological colleges that have a relationship with a Russell Group University, Union has a long, positive and mutually beneficial relationship with Queen's. The recommendations of this latest review in effect belittles the oversight of external examiners from prestigious UK universities and the effectiveness of the University's own quality assurance processes. By suggesting that students of Theology at Queen's have not been exposed to a breadth of theological perspective runs counter to, and contradicts, the reports of external examiners for Theology at Queen's over many years.

Not by choice, over the last number of years, Union College has become the sole provider of undergraduate degree programmes at the University. The other colleges that once made up the Institute of Theology at Queen's - the Methodist Church's Edgehill College, Irish Baptist College and Belfast Bible College - were for various reasons unable to continue to offer Queen's undergraduate programmes. Union College has become the only College able offer the full range of the Theology curriculum within the Institute.

In responding to the decision taken today, it is important to be clear on a number of areas especially the BA in Theology. Following the Strategic Review of Theology at Queen's in 2016, members of Union College's Faculty were

December 19, 2018

proactive in contributing to the development of a new undergraduate degree programme, the BA in Theology, which widened the curriculum and met the Review's recommendation for increased cultural and intellectual diversity. As to why Northern Ireland's three other theological colleges found themselves unable to work with Queen's University is, of course, an open question.

With students taking 30% of their modules in related humanities, such as Philosophy, Anthropology and others, which guaranteed that students were exposed to a variety of subjects and approaches as part of their undergraduate experience.

Recognising that Queen's itself initiated this significant change, it is therefore, regrettable that the University initiated a further review of this programme in Sept 2018 in the very first week of its delivery and has not allowed it to run for sufficient time so that it may be appropriately monitored and evaluated.

At the same time, some of the recommendations of this current 2018 Review Panel are very speculative and totally unsubstantiated. The Review infers that a lack of diversity in the College staff and variable staff profiles "has the potential to impact negatively on the student experience". These conclusions have no basis in fact and are not supported by student testimonials, or the University's own monitoring procedures over many years.

While obviously seeking to maintain our confessional commitment and Christian ethos, the College's goal has never been shirk the difficult and hard questions that relate to religious faith and belief. The College continues to be

December 19, 2018

actively engaged in research that extends our theological understanding of important issues in contemporary life. Is the real issue that there is no place for a Christian college linked to the Queen's University of today?

Union College will consider its formal response to the Review and will continue to support, academically and pastorally, our students who have embarked on their studies.

References

QUB will not admit new students to Union Theological College

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-46612527>

Union College responds to QUB review

<https://www.presbyterianireland.org/News/2018-News-Archive/December-2018/Union-College-responds-to-QUB-review.aspx>

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