

**Theology and religious studies**

**2007**

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## Preface

Subject benchmark statements provide a means for the academic community to describe the nature and characteristics of programmes in a specific subject or subject area. They also represent general expectations about standards for the award of qualifications at a given level in terms of the attributes and capabilities that those possessing qualifications should have demonstrated.

This subject benchmark statement, together with others published concurrently, refers to the **bachelor's degree with honours**<sup>1</sup>. In addition, some subject benchmark statements provide guidance on integrated master's awards.

Subject benchmark statements are used for a variety of purposes. Primarily, they are an important external source of reference for higher education institutions (HEIs) when new programmes are being designed and developed in a subject area. They provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with the programme but are not a specification of a detailed curriculum in the subject.

Subject benchmark statements also provide support to HEIs in pursuit of internal quality assurance. They enable the learning outcomes specified for a particular programme to be reviewed and evaluated against agreed general expectations about standards. Subject benchmark statements allow for flexibility and innovation in programme design and can stimulate academic discussion and debate upon the content of new and existing programmes within an agreed overall framework. Their use in supporting programme design, delivery and review within HEIs is supportive of moves towards an emphasis on institutional responsibility for standards and quality.

Subject benchmark statements may also be of interest to prospective students and employers, seeking information about the nature and standards of awards in a given subject or subject area.

The relationship between the standards set out in this document and those produced by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies for individual disciplines will be a matter for individual HEIs to consider in detail.

This subject benchmark statement represents a revised version of the original published in 2000. The review process was overseen by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) as part of a periodic review of all subject benchmark statements published in this year. The review and subsequent revision of the subject benchmark statement was undertaken by a group of subject specialists drawn from and acting on behalf of the subject community. The revised subject benchmark statement went through a full consultation with the wider academic community and stakeholder groups.

QAA publishes and distributes this subject benchmark statement and other subject benchmark statements developed by similar subject-specific groups.

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<sup>1</sup> This is equivalent to the honours degree in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (level 10) and in the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (level 6).

The Disability Equality Duty (DED) came into force on 4 December 2006<sup>2</sup>. The DED requires public authorities, including HEIs, to act proactively on disability equality issues. The Duty complements the individual rights focus of the *Disability Discrimination Act* (DDA) and is aimed at improving public services and outcomes for disabled people as a whole. Responsibility for making sure that such duty is met lies with HEIs.

The Disability Rights Commission (DRC) has published guidance<sup>3</sup> to help HEIs prepare for the implementation of the Duty and provided illustrative examples on how to take the duty forward. HEIs are encouraged to read this guidance when considering their approach to engaging with components of the Academic Infrastructure<sup>4</sup>, of which subject benchmark statements are a part.

Additional information that may assist HEIs when engaging with subject benchmark statements can be found in the DRC revised *Code of Practice: Post-16 Education*<sup>5</sup>, and also through the Equality Challenge Unit<sup>6</sup> which is established to promote equality and diversity in higher education.

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<sup>2</sup> In England, Scotland and Wales

<sup>3</sup> Copies of the guidance *Further and higher education institutions and the Disability Equality Duty*, guidance for principals, vice-chancellors, governing boards and senior managers working in further education colleges and HEIs in England, Scotland and Wales, may be obtained from the DRC at [www.drc-gb.org/library/publications/disability\\_equality\\_duty/further\\_and\\_higher\\_education.aspx](http://www.drc-gb.org/library/publications/disability_equality_duty/further_and_higher_education.aspx)

<sup>4</sup> An explanation of the Academic Infrastructure, and the roles of subject benchmark statements within it, is available at [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure)

<sup>5</sup> Copies of the DRC revised *Code of Practice: Post-16 Education* may be obtained from the DRC at [www.drc-gb.org/employers\\_and\\_service\\_provider/education/higher\\_education.aspx](http://www.drc-gb.org/employers_and_service_provider/education/higher_education.aspx)

<sup>6</sup> Equality Challenge Unit, [www.ecu.ac.uk](http://www.ecu.ac.uk)

# 1 Introduction

1.1 Theology and religious studies (TRS) in the higher education (HE) sector is a dynamic subject area marked by both expansion and diversification. Around 50 higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK provide programmes in it. Aspects of the subject are also found integrated into other subject provision across the humanities and the social sciences. In addition, there are other providers who offer courses validated by HEIs. The vitality and richness of the subject reflects its significance in the context of a world coming to terms with its cultural and religious diversity. Beliefs, values and institutions, whether described as religious or not, are contested.

1.2 Providers aim to promote understanding in a variety of ways, for example, by:

- stimulating curiosity about and fascination for the variety of religious cultures across the globe, both past and present
- enabling in-depth study of the sacred texts, history, practices and developed theology (or religious thought) of one or more particular religious traditions
- creating opportunities to consider the artistic, ethical, gendered, social, political and cultural characteristics of religion(s)
- exploring in an interdisciplinary way the interface between religion and theology on the one hand and literature, culture and the arts on the other
- opening up awareness of plurality within societies and within religious traditions, including the capacity of religious allegiances for conflict
- fostering empathetic engagement with both familiar and unfamiliar viewpoints
- promoting self-critical awareness of presuppositions and encouraging constructive and critical exposition of an argument for a particular position
- inviting participation both in debate about the nature of the subject and dialogue between different traditions
- encouraging intelligent use of a variety of theories and methods of study and engaging in critical analysis of relevant data and arguments
- providing opportunities for critical involvement in changing the way things are (eg liberationist or feminist approaches).

1.3 Given that constant new development has been the characteristic of the field of TRS since the latter half of the twentieth century, both in the UK and elsewhere, it is vital that any definition of the subject does not constrain future innovation, whether in response to global trends and issues or new intellectual climates. At the same time, justifiable continuation of well-tried methodologies and traditional subject matters must be honoured, if justice is to be done to what is actually going on in HE. While the title TRS is carried by many programmes, for others simply religious studies, theology or divinity is used. Others specify biblical studies, for example, or Buddhist studies, Islamic studies, Jewish studies etc. Others may use some such title as applied theological studies where their character is intended to be more fitting for those entering a range of caring professions; similarly for prospective school teachers the title may be religious education. The title will reflect the range of modules offered (see Appendix A).

1.4 The programmes delivered in different institutional contexts are diverse for good reason, and flourish in different academic frameworks. Some HE providers:

- aim to study and analyse religion(s) as a significant dimension of human culture, especially to enhance understanding of its importance in shaping societies, history and peoples and, in turn, of their influence in shaping religions; while others focus on key bodies of religious literature (eg the Bible) and particular religious traditions within a general humanities framework
- offer recognised programmes for the professional formation of ministers for the various churches represented in Britain; others provide the equivalent for other religious communities (eg Scottish schools of divinity and validated theological colleges)
- offering such theological or professional programmes have diversified alongside that provision into religious studies elements (see paragraph 1.5).
- argue in principle that at least two religions should be studied in some depth, some because students may go on to train as teachers in multicultural and pluralist Britain
- operate within institutions with a specific confessional stance (eg theological colleges, Bible colleges, Jewish colleges)
- offer residential full-time programmes; others specialise in distance or open learning; some offer a range of modes of study, including residential, part-time and distance elements
- provide a menu from which students may choose to follow up their interests or diversify, depending upon their goals in pursuing the programme
- incorporate or overlap some elements from TRS with programmes in other disciplines.

1.5 This diversity of programme and institution is the result of the history of TRS as an academic discipline. In the medieval universities of Europe, theology was 'Queen of the Sciences'. The Reformation resulted in separate Protestant and Catholic faculties, professionally engaged in training clerics, in Continental Europe often existing side by side in the same university, and in England and Scotland closely linked with the established church in each realm.

1.6 By the time the University of Berlin was founded in 1809, post-Enlightenment rationalism had raised the question of whether theology should be represented there at all, but the subject was able to justify itself as one that owed allegiance to general standards of rationality and academic freedom, while providing professional training of clergy for the state church. The influence of this German model has meant that theology has been in intensive dialogue with other subject disciplines ever since, and the Christian tradition, its scriptures and history, has been subject to vigorous examination and argument wherever theology is represented on a university campus.

1.7 In Britain, academic theology is conducted as an intellectual enquiry which engages with a range of methods of study, subject matters and disciplines. This academic tradition includes pastoral and practical theology, often, but not exclusively,

for the training of professionals, and these subjects have been influenced by developments in psychology, group therapy, counselling, social work etc. Given its engagement with post-Enlightenment rationality, contentious issues for theology include the grounds for believing in God and the roles of revelation and faith. Most would accept that the ability to engage with 'inside' and 'outside' perspectives is important, and that theological enquiry and academic study of religions should not exclude either believers or non-believers.

1.8 Meanwhile, religious studies developed out of oriental studies and the fascination Western scholars found in the discovery of the languages and sacred literatures of the East; the 'scientific' study of religion, which was sometimes closely bound up with the early development of anthropology, sociology and psychology; and the comparative study of religion. The subject grew dramatically in Britain from the 1960s. It has been characterised by:

- valuing and studying cultures, texts, arts and practices of societies both within and beyond Europe
- considerable interaction with the social sciences and with contemporary cultural, literary and gender studies
- engagement with the plurality of religions in Britain and Europe
- cross-cultural comparisons of topics such as beliefs and practices
- extensive debates about aims, methods and assumptions in the subject.

1.9 In teaching, as in research, work in this field has involved not only language studies, but also fieldwork, social surveys and concern with the visual and performing arts. Dialogue with scholars beyond Europe, often people from within religions studied, has increased substantially. Whereas 'theology' once implied Christian thought, nowadays the term is sometimes used also of Islamic and Jewish teaching.

1.10 Coming from this background, religious studies aimed to adopt a neutral, phenomenological or objective stance, in opposition to a perceived traditional apologetic commitment and Eurocentric focus of theology. Hostilities are still found in the academic world outside Britain, where the subjects are often institutionally separate. Within Britain, there is lively ongoing debate which has enriched both academic traditions, particularly as they have responded to the realities of pluralist Britain and globalisation. Each has influenced the development of the other. Biblical studies has long been shaped by both approaches, while in some contexts it has deliberately positioned itself as a humanities subject without explicit connection to either theology or religious studies.

1.11 As a result of this history, TRS is marked by diversity but also elements of convergence. The review group for the subject benchmark statement for TRS has adopted the policy of agreeing generic descriptors which will apply to different degree programmes and various subject areas in diverse ways. It is essential that programme specifications drawn up by individual institutions make particular learning outcomes more specific.

1.12 Diversity is also driven by the differing backgrounds and intentions of both staff and students who enrol on the programmes: Some want to:

- explore TRS out of sheer fascination for the subject
- study religion or sacred/scriptural texts because of their political, philosophical, social or cultural importance
- pursue religious commitments
- pursue a clearly identified career path (such as teaching, ministry, social work, race relations or international relations) for which the programme is part of the preparation.

1.13 Whatever the subject, the acquisition of knowledge and understanding is usually transformative at some level, changing a person's perspectives and often their attitudes. The nature of TRS means that studying the subject may have a profound impact on the student's life and outlook. The experience of studying this subject may contribute to a student's personal development, transforming horizons by engaging with cultures and societies other than their own, whether ancient or modern. It may foster a lifelong quest for wisdom, respect for one's own integrity and that of others, self-examination in terms of the beliefs and values adopted for one's own life, a better understanding of its role in geo-political conflict and, not least, the challenging of prejudices. The multidisciplinary nature of much TRS also means that students have breadth of vision and intellectual flexibility.

1.14 The interface between academic study and practising religious communities is complex and significant. Critical analysis may destabilise profoundly held convictions producing sharp rejection of academic study, but may also stimulate real engagement with contemporary concerns. Such study is a major contributor to cross-cultural understanding and the avoidance or challenging of prejudices arising from misinformation. It may also contribute to the articulate self-awareness of particular religious traditions, particularly as religious leaders of several of the traditions represented in Britain have in fact often studied TRS.

1.15 Many public issues have a religious dimension, and since the attacks in the United States of America on 11 September 2001, this has become increasingly apparent to many. Democratic society has an interest in ensuring that in matters of religion, debate is well-informed and of high quality. Such understanding has potential for conflict resolution, for example, in international understanding and race relations in the UK. It is important that universities have places where thorough and thoughtful engagement with current religious issues (including political, ethical and educational questions) can go on, thus enabling public debate to be resourced appropriately on all sides. The fact that TRS graduates mostly go into a variety of careers means that there is a pool of citizens with a sophisticated understanding of religion who are able to contribute to debate in many areas of society.

1.16 This subject benchmark statement is not intended to challenge the diversity briefly sketched here, nor stifle potential future development of the subject.

## 2 Nature and extent of theology and religious studies

2.1 TRS as a subject discipline may be characterised as a family of methods, disciplines and fields of study, clustered around the investigation both of the phenomena of religions and belief systems in general, and of particular religious traditions, texts, practices, societies, art and archaeology. Most would identify within this the unifying principle of addressing questions raised about, within or between religions through a range of different academic disciplines. Some would emphasise the unifying focus that comes from studying particular religious traditions and/or texts as coherent systems with their own integrity. Some would affirm as a core the intention of raising questions of meaning and truth, beauty and value.

2.2 Much of the excitement of the discipline lies in its contested nature. What should or should not be regarded as belonging to the subject, what methods should be used, the different results that come from adopting different presuppositions - these are some of the issues. Students normally experience the stimulation of engaging in debate at a fundamental level. The development of the discipline (see paragraphs 1.4 and 1.5) has shaped some of its current emphases and predominant approaches.

2.3 In the post-Enlightenment debates about theology, questions of history and interpretation figured large as the validity of Christianity was tested. The historico-critical method long held undisputed dominance in biblical studies, while much archaeology was both motivated and exploited by the interests of biblical historians. Historical theology and church history have remained core elements in many theology degrees. Religious studies also engages in such historical and textual studies. The development of Buddhist, Islamic and Jewish studies, for example, has tended to follow the historical paradigm, even in the interpretation of their sacred texts. Such historical approaches distinguish academic exegesis from the kind of exposition offered in religious communities.

2.4 However, more recently the range of studies encompassed by TRS has been influenced, not only by what is happening in literary criticism elsewhere, but also by sociological approaches, including sometimes engaging in fieldwork. Observation of religious practices and theoretical analyses of information so acquired sits alongside the study of texts and history. Thus both theology and religious studies are now likely to aim to provide students with opportunity to engage in the twofold exercise of:

- i exploring the religious thought of one or more traditions so as to understand each in its integrity and diversity and grasp its integrative role in relation to practices of worship and ethics, and
- ii analysing the historical, social, cultural and artistic role of religion or belief systems.

In both contexts students explore both an inside and an outside perspective. Each may be achieved in a variety of different ways. For example i may involve the study of the extant works of a major religious thinker, prophet or leader, while ii may generate a hermeneutic of suspicion by taking seriously a Marxist or feminist analysis.

2.5 TRS developed in dialogue with modernity. Now it also responds to postmodernity. The European Enlightenment set an agenda which profoundly shaped biblical studies and modern theology. Increasingly hermeneutics, critical theory and post-modern agendas have informed all aspects of the subject. Global perspectives, interfaith and ecumenical issues, issues of gender, race and culture, as well as fundamental debates about methods of study figure large in discussions about the nature and parameters of TRS. Such factors, along with the practical and pastoral elements required in some programmes, have generated the range of different topics currently offered in TRS (and associated) programmes (see list in Appendix A).

2.6 The disciplines from which TRS draws and to which it relates may be listed as:

- anthropology
- archaeology
- area studies
- classics
- cultural studies
- economics
- education
- ethics
- gender studies or women's studies
- health studies
- history
- language(s)
- law
- literature
- media studies
- natural sciences
- philosophy
- political science
- psychology
- sociology
- social policy and social work
- visual and performing arts.

2.7 The range of courses on individual programmes will depend on the specific degree offered and the institutional context (see paragraphs 1.2 and 1.3). No provider has the resources to cover everything that may be properly regarded as included in TRS, and the rich diversity of curricula means that students have significant choice. The title of the degree may be an important indicator, but the programme specification will clarify more precisely what is offered. Whatever the choice of programme, modules or

institution students may have made, they are unlikely to escape awareness of the formative influence on current intellectual frameworks or present social realities of some of the following movements:

- the Enlightenment critique of religion
- the development of historical consciousness
- anthropology from the 'myth and ritual' approach to contemporary ethnography and subsequent developments
- the impact of science from Galileo through Darwin to current developments
- the scientific and historico-critical challenges to the authority of scriptures
- growing awareness of the world's religions
- the 'New Age' and new religious movements
- secularisation and the rise of the social sciences
- post-colonialism and the critique of Western culture
- widening cultural horizons, the rise of postmodernity, pluralism and globalism
- religions in diaspora
- gender studies or gender critical studies.

2.8 Whatever the context, students should expect to be confronted with some of the questions raised by this general intellectual history and to consider viewpoints other than their own and other than any declared stance of the institution where they are studying. Critical dialogue is essential to the subject as studied at HE level.

### **3 Subject knowledge and skills**

3.1 As indicated, the nature of TRS is multidisciplinary, covering a wide area of subject matter and methods of study. Programme specifications will indicate what of all the rich diversity is offered by different providers. Particular programmes will touch on most of the following and focus on some of them.

- A broadly based core together with the wider context required for the subject area covered by the programme in question, and specialised study in depth of some aspects of the discipline or field. This implies not just the mastery of data but also the setting of these data within a theoretical framework which includes critical analysis and debate about how to understand and structure the raw data into a coherent whole.
- One or more religions, ancient or modern, including the origin, history and developed or present character of each.
- The reading, analysis and interpretation of texts, sometimes in the original languages, particularly texts that have been sacred to one or more practising communities. This study will often focus both on the historical context which generated the text(s) and on hermeneutical questions concerning its (their) meaning and application for the appropriate community of believers in the present, or for other readers today.

- Engagement with some of the major religious thinkers, prophets, teachers, ascetics, mystics, healers, or leaders through their extant work or subsequent influence.
- The application of a variety of critical methods of study, often adapted from those of other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, to the study of texts, practices, religious communities as social and cultural entities, or their diverse art forms.
- The history of the particular discipline(s) covered by the programme, including the major theories, movements and thinkers.
- Ethics, morality, and values. All religions have certain expectations in these areas, and the student will include them in the study along with other aspects of the religion. Even if the religion is studied only historically, the values and problems for living as an adherent of the religion do not go unnoticed by the student. (The current range of possible subject matters is indicated in Appendix A).

3.2 The qualities of mind that a competent student should acquire by studying TRS may be characterised as follows.

- The ability to understand how people have thought and acted in contexts other than the student's own, how beliefs, doctrines and practices have developed within particular social and cultural contexts and how religious traditions have changed over time (a degree of 'cultural shock' may be involved in study of the past, as well as in the encounter with the beliefs, doctrines and practices of contemporary others).
- The ability to read and use texts both critically and empathetically, while addressing such questions as genre, content, context, perspective, purpose, original and potential meaning, and the effect of translation if the text is not read in the original language.
- The appreciation of the complexity of different mentalities, social behaviours and aesthetic responses, and of the ways they have been shaped by beliefs and values, and conversely how beliefs, sacred texts and art forms have been shaped by society and politics.
- Sensitivity to the problems of religious language and experience, and to the issues of multiple and conflicting interpretations of language and symbols, texts and traditions. Simplistic, literalising or doctrinaire explanations are less likely to be advanced by a student of TRS.
- Appreciation of both the interconnectedness of and internal tensions within a system of beliefs and practices.
- Basic critical and analytical skills: a recognition that statements should be tested, that evidence and arguments are subject to assessment, that the interpreter's role demands critical evaluation.
- The ability to employ a variety of methods of study in analysing material, to think independently, set tasks and solve problems.
- The capacity to give a clear and accurate account of a subject, marshal arguments in a mature way and engage in debate and dialogue with respect for the opposite case or different viewpoint.

3.3 Such qualities of mind may be regarded as intellectual skills and competencies arising from study of the subject. As in other academic disciplines, they are supported by commitment to integrity in pursuit of understanding and to being true to the object(s) of study, and by recognition of the contested and provisional nature of knowledge and understanding.

3.4 Some generic skills, such as independence of mind, derive from such intellectual qualities. Others, such as self-discipline and the ability to gather, organise and deploy evidence and information, emerge from the processes of studying the subject. Others again will be increasingly acquired by students as the use of communications and information technology (IT) expands in HE, or providers encourage teamwork and oral presentation skills as part of the learning process. Programme specifications will be more specific but the potential range of skills that may be acquired would include a majority of the following:

- empathy and imaginative insight, with a tolerance of diverse positions
- self-discipline
- self-direction
- independence of mind and initiative
- capacity for reflexive learning
- commitment to lifelong learning
- ability to attend to others and have respect for others' views
- capacity to modify, suspend or otherwise change position when warranted
- ability to gather, evaluate and synthesise different types of information
- analytical ability and the capacity to formulate questions and solve problems
- presentation skills, both oral and written
- IT skills, including word-processing, communicating by email and using the web, accessing information from electronic as well as non-electronic sources
- teamwork skills
- writing skills, including accurate referencing and clarity of expression
- ability to attend closely to the meaning of written documents
- ability to read texts in a different language.

(For further information on employability profiles for TRS, visit [www.ciheuk.com/publications.php](http://www.ciheuk.com/publications.php))

3.5 The above description reflects the student attainments that providers focus upon achieving by the time of graduation. Section 5 indicates standards of achievement at the threshold level by comparison with such goals, which might be described as the typical (focal) level.

## **4 Teaching, learning and assessment**

### **General principles**

4.1 TRS may be studied on single honours, joint or combined honours, major-minor programmes or within general degrees. Modules or courses may be open to students whose principal area of study lies elsewhere. Whatever the intensity of study, similar learning outcomes are expected of those students undertaking the modules/courses. Highly specialised or advanced modules/courses (eg in languages) are not always made available to students who are not majoring in the subject, and the same progression, in terms of building up experience and intellectual maturity in the subject, is unlikely to be achieved by those for whom the subject is a minor element in their total degree programme. Nevertheless, they often bring benefits to the study of religion from better acquaintance with the methods of other disciplines, and this may enhance their capacity to achieve the relevant learning outcomes. The standards specified within this document are for single honours degrees.

4.2 TRS attracts considerable numbers of mature students, students from the ethnic minorities and non-traditional students. Mature students, in particular, often bring experience and motivation to the study of the subject that enhances their capacity for achievement at high levels, despite sometimes suffering initial deficit in study skills and academic writing skills. Sometimes, HE providers attune their curricula to enable satisfactory progression for particular learners. The diversity of students from different religious and cultural backgrounds enhances the vitality of TRS.

4.3 TRS is a subject that promotes lifelong learning. Although there are students who just see it as part of their study for a degree, many of those who are attracted to the subject are people who approach it as an element in the development of their own life, especially those who undertake it as a second degree, come into HE later in life or undertake studies as part of professional training, not infrequently as they embark on a second career. The relatively high numbers who progress or return to postgraduate study also reflects the fact that students discover an urge to take their studies further and pursue them at greater depth.

### **Student learning**

4.4 Independent learning lies at the heart of studying TRS. Traditionally the focus has been on library-based work with wide and deep reading of both primary and secondary sources to enlarge the temporal, geographical, social and cultural horizons of participants. Beyond this, however, personal encounter, fieldwork and practical placements may play a significant role in some programmes. Unless students are engaged actively in the process of seeking to understand, they will not gain the most important benefits from their study. As more resources become available through the internet, IT plays an increasingly important role in the development of student learning, especially enhancing their ability to search for information. The need to draw upon a variety of sources and experiences and evaluate them critically is essential to the learning process. The writing of essays and other assignments is a significant element in digesting, analysing and presenting what is learned. The development of cogent argument is fundamental to the subject. Guidance may be given through recommended book lists and tutorial advice, but progressively students are encouraged to develop independence, especially by undertaking longer projects or dissertations.

4.5 Experiential and group learning is central to some approaches to TRS. For students on some programmes the action-reflection model of learning enables interaction between experience and analysis, and group participation in discussion facilitates understanding of situations observed. For students on other programmes similar activities would be termed fieldwork, and may take the form of group projects.

4.6 Distance learning is available for substantial numbers of students and provision is likely to increase. Structured distance-learning materials enable the student to progress at their own pace, and detailed feedback is provided through tutorial guidance which may be through correspondence, email, telephone, web blogs, audio, video-conferencing and sometimes supported by occasional day or residential schools.

### **Teaching methods**

4.7 Lecture courses have traditionally enabled teachers to provide an overall perspective on a subject area and designate the parameters of the syllabus. They may also provide exemplary discussions of a topic, models for considering and assessing different views of a subject, or for clear distillation of essential points. Lectures often provide a valuable opportunity to grasp the particular stance of a scholar, to gain further insight into disputed questions, and to raise matters directly with the lecturer. In addition, their impact as an initial viva voce introduction to a subject is established. It has become good practice to issue handouts indicating the aims and objectives of particular modules/courses and indeed individual lectures. Students often prefer to meet subjects first through lectures which can offer explanations of material that may seem very complicated. The disadvantage of the traditional lecture, however, is that much of the emphasis may be on delivery, not on ensuring good reception. Classes which allow for interaction in the form of questions, discussion, dialogue and argument have helped to alleviate this problem. Lectures may also be replaced by the use of other media, particularly in contexts where distance learning is provided. Whatever the contexts, students should never be allowed to imagine that material provided through lectures alone is adequate to achieve a good grasp of the subject. Book lists encourage wider reading of peer reviewed scholarship, while also discouraging over-reliance on internet sources that can be superficial or misleading.

4.8 Debate and dialogue, interaction with peers and teachers, is vital for the pursuit of TRS, since attending to people who understand things in a variety of different ways is a significant feature of the subject. Seminars and tutorials, often initiated by one or more student papers or essays but allowing time for questions and discussion, are the most common vehicle for this engagement. Alternative interactive possibilities (such as telephone, email, video or electronic conferencing etc) may become increasingly appropriate, especially where provision is made for distance learning.

4.9 Where appropriate, a number of other learning opportunities will be provided, for example:

- language classes for the acquisition and practice of particular linguistic skills
- reading classes to work through primary texts, whether in the original language or English translation; computer-based learning
- fieldwork conducted through social scientific methods of study

- social survey work
- practical placements, parallel to those undertaken by those training for the caring professions (eg social work), often practising the action/reflection model of learning
- archaeological excavation; and iconographic/architectural studies.

4.10 In all such cases, the careful articulation of clear goals and expected learning outcomes is the key to their effectiveness.

4.11 Programme specifications will indicate clearly the range of learning and teaching methods to be experienced by the student undertaking the programme. They are likely to include:

- lectures/presentations
- seminars
- tutorials, supervisions or other small group work
- language classes
- text-reading classes
- fieldwork
- placements
- workshops
- reading (and accessing electronic information sources) with appropriate guidance
- working on individual or group projects
- giving presentations and discussing the presentations of other students
- working through distance-learning methods
- forms of e-learning.

### **Progression**

4.12 Programme specifications will make clear how student progression takes place over the three years (or equivalent) of a degree programme. (In the Scottish universities, the standard length of the honours degree programme is four years.) The various subject matters of TRS may be learned at many different levels, prior to HE at school, at different stages of the degree programme and beyond graduation. Different HE programmes arrange the order in which subjects are treated in different ways. Progression in the subject therefore requires the acquisition of greater facility and competence (eg in languages), greater depth or sharpness of focus and deepening intellectual maturity. Single honours programmes, for example, normally provide the opportunity for a major project/dissertation as one way of ensuring that independence and intellectual maturity are attained.

## Assessment

4.13 Assessment may be intended to ascertain that stated learning outcomes have been achieved, or may be designed to be formative in the sense of assisting students to reach agreed learning objectives. A mix of assessment methods enables students to demonstrate a range of attainments and skills. Methods of assessment should be justified by their purpose. Long debates about the relative merits of written examinations and continuous assessment by means of essays have diversified practice among providers.

4.14 The merit of examinations is that, carefully devised, they may ascertain the extent to which students have internalised and understood the material so as to be able to use it intelligently to answer questions framed in a way that is unanticipated. Revision for examinations also encourages integrated understanding. Without assessment of this kind, learning may remain partial. However, the traditional three-hour written examination may lead students to treat the process as a memory test, although the learning outcomes which are the goal of the particular courses/modules being examined invariably go beyond simple memorisation.

4.15 The essay method of assessment is often regarded as more satisfactory. Essays enable good, well-researched, in-depth treatment of topics. However, over-dependence upon reference material can become problematic and, especially if undetected, may obscure the extent to which learning outcomes have genuinely been achieved. In common with other subjects, TRS faces the issue of plagiarism, particularly now that internet material is easily available. Nevertheless the production of essays, dissertations or project reports is seen by many HE providers as a vital element in formative assessment.

4.16 In response to the demand to foster generic skills, many HE providers have sought to assess oral presentations, group work and other non-traditional forms of submission. In such cases, criteria for assessment need to be clearly articulated, particularly if an element of peer assessment is involved.

4.17 Reports on fieldwork or placements and project dissertations may be subject to oral examination in order to clarify the student's contribution to the work and the extent to which learning outcomes have been achieved. Supervisors' reports may be used in the process of assessment. Normally, however, the assessment of such work includes examiners other than the supervisor, and involves the appropriate external examiner.

4.18 The range of assessment methods used in TRS programmes, as appropriate to the learning outcomes specified, include:

- timed written examinations
- essays with access to information sources
- language tests/examinations
- oral presentations
- individual dissertation/project reports/presentations
- group project reports/presentations
- fieldwork reports/presentations
- analysis of survey material
- placement reports/presentations
- oral examinations.

## **5 Benchmark standards**

5.1 Standards are expressed in terms of learning outcomes. Threshold standards are set alongside typical levels of attainment, which are the goal or focus for students on TRS programmes. Students may graduate if they have achieved knowledge and understanding sufficient to provide a basic presentation of information or argument(s) with respect to particular material (ie at threshold level). However, the goal and focus of TRS programmes is to produce students capable of independently evaluating information and engaging in critical analysis and argument for themselves (ie at typical level). It is important that students are informed of this distinction and inspired to reach beyond the threshold level. Excellent students transcend the learning outcomes and would display originality, insight and the ability to progress to research.

5.2 The subject benchmark statement is not laying down a curriculum. A single honours programme which specifies both breadth and depth should be regarded as potentially fitting students to meet at least the requisite threshold standard. Breadth may be interpreted in a variety of ways, such as, coverage of more than one religion, or the use of a range of different methods of study (history, philosophy, exegesis, hermeneutics, etc), or attention to a variety of different historical periods/geographical environments/social contexts etc. Depth implies some degree of specialisation, detailed focus upon a topic and the avoidance of superficiality. The stated learning outcomes are indicative, and do not form a checklist. It is not expected that all programmes will necessarily lead to the attainment of all the stated learning outcomes.

5.3 Paragraphs 5.4 to 5.9 provide indicative learning outcomes and should be read in conjunction with programme specifications which will be determined by each institution. There is no sense in which this provides a standard curriculum. It is recognised that explicit assessment of some skills, especially those implying personal development, may be more difficult than assessment of the acquisition of knowledge.

### **Indicative statements of threshold and typical levels of achievement in theology and religious studies**

#### **Knowledge and understanding**

##### **Threshold standard**

5.4 On graduating with an honours degree in theology and religious studies, students should be able to:

- demonstrate knowledge of at least one religious tradition in some of its varied and central forms
- describe in broad terms some of the following: political, social, textual, intellectual, historical, theological, ritual, ethical, institutional and aesthetic expressions of the religion(s) studied
- describe, where appropriate, the religion's or religions' classical sources and their subsequent articulations by some interpreters of the tradition(s) in different historical periods, and in different social or geographical settings

- summarise, represent and interpret a range of both primary and secondary sources including materials from different disciplines
- demonstrate an awareness of key themes, debates, and methods of the discipline and, where appropriate, related disciplines from, for example, the humanities or the social sciences.

### **Typical standard**

5.5 On graduating with an honours degree in theology and religious studies, students should be able to:

- demonstrate comprehension of and intelligent engagement with the richness of at least one religious tradition in its varied and central forms
- state clearly, discuss and demonstrate critical comprehension of some of the following: the political, social, textual, intellectual, historical, theological, ritual, ethical, institutional or aesthetic expressions of the religion(s) studied
- discuss and demonstrate, where appropriate, critical comprehension of the religion's or religions' classical sources and their subsequent articulations by some interpreters of the tradition(s) in different historical periods and in different social or geographical settings
- evaluate and critically analyse a diversity of primary and secondary sources, including materials from different disciplines
- demonstrate comprehension and critically analyse a range of themes, debates and methods of the discipline and where appropriate related disciplines from, for example, the humanities or social sciences and evaluate a range of critical scholarship associated with these disciplines.

### **Discipline-specific and intellectual skills**

#### **Threshold standard**

5.6 On graduating with an honours degree in theology and religious studies, students should be able to:

- represent views other than the student's own with fairness and integrity and as appropriate express their own identity without denigration of others
- demonstrate awareness of the passion and claims to certainty that may arise in religious traditions, with their positive and negative effects
- demonstrate an awareness of the multi-faceted complexity of religions, for example in the relationship between specifically religious beliefs, texts, practices and institutions, and wider social and cultural structures, perspectives, norms, aesthetics and aspirations
- use a number of complementary methods of study, for example, philosophical, historical, systematic, dogmatic, phenomenological, linguistic, hermeneutical, empirical, speculative, social scientific, archaeological
- demonstrate awareness of religious contributions to debate in the public arena about, for example, values, truth, beauty, identity, health, peace and justice
- demonstrate awareness of how personal and communal identities and motivations are shaped by religion, how this has both constructive and destructive effects, and how important such identities are.

## Typical standard

5.7 On graduating with an honours degree in theology and religious studies, students should be able to:

- represent views other than the student's own sensitively and intelligently with fairness and integrity, while as appropriate expressing their own identity without denigration of others, through critical engagement in a spirit of generosity, openness and empathy
- demonstrate with sensitivity awareness of the passion and claims to certainty that may arise in religious traditions, with their positive and negative effects
- demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the multi-faceted complexity of religions, for example in the relationship between specifically religious beliefs, texts, practices and institutions, and wider social and cultural structures, norms, aesthetics and aspirations
- demonstrate intellectual flexibility through the practice of a variety of complementary methods of study, for example, philosophical, historical, systematic, dogmatic, phenomenological, linguistic, hermeneutical, empirical, speculative, social scientific, archaeological
- demonstrate awareness of and critical assessment of religious contributions to debate in the public arena about, for example, values, truth, beauty, identity, health, peace and justice
- demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of how personal and communal identities and motivations are shaped by religion, how this has both constructive and destructive effects, and how important such identities are.

## Generic skills (transferable skills)

### Threshold standard

5.8 On graduating with an honours degree in theology and religious studies, students should be able to:

- communicate information, ideas, arguments, principles and theories by a variety of means, for example, essays of various lengths which are clearly organised and presented
- communicate information, ideas, principles and theories by appropriate oral and visual means
- identify, gather and discuss primary data and source material, whether through textual studies or fieldwork
- attend to, reproduce accurately and reflect on the ideas and arguments of others
- engage with empathy and integrity with the convictions and behaviours of others
- work collaboratively as a member of a team or group
- undertake independent study (including time management)
- use library resources in order to identify source material, compile bibliographies, inform research and enhance presentations

- use IT and computer skills for data capture, to identify source material and support research and presentations
- show critical self-awareness about one's own beliefs, commitments, and prejudices.

### **Typical standard**

5.9 On graduating with an honours degree in theology and religious studies, students should be able to:

- communicate information, ideas, arguments, principles, theories, and develop an argument by a variety of means, for example essays of various lengths and dissertations which are clearly and effectively organised and presented
- communicate information, ideas, principles and theories and develop an argument effectively by appropriate oral and visual means, and relate materials to an intended audience
- identify, gather and analyse primary data and source material, whether through textual studies or fieldwork
- attend to, reproduce accurately, reflect on and interact with the ideas and arguments of others
- engage with empathy, integrity and critical reflection with the convictions and behaviours of others
- work collaboratively as a member of a team or group in a way which allows each individual's talents to be utilised effectively
- undertake independent/self-directed study/learning (including time management) and reflect on one's strengths and weaknesses as a learner
- make discriminating use of a full range of library resources in order to identify appropriate source material, compile bibliographies, inform research and enhance presentations
- use IT and computer skills for data capture, to identify appropriate source material, support research, and enhance presentations
- show independence in thought, and critical self-awareness about one's own beliefs, commitments and prejudices.

## **Appendix A - The current range of possible subject matters for theology and religious studies**

This appendix is provided for general information. Currently, providers offer modules or courses which would fall under the following headings.

**Biblical studies:** Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, early Judaism (Septuagint (LXX) and Intertestamental), New Testament and Early Christianity. Such studies would be literary, historical, social, theological and/or hermeneutical in their methods of study.

**Studies of other religious literatures:** such as Talmud and Rabbinic sources, Qur'an, Hadith, Zoroastrian Gathas, Buddhist Sutras and Abhidharma, Hindu Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita, Tao Te Ching.

**Languages:** Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Aramaic, Syriac, Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Pali, etc.

**Christian theology:** Historical (Patristic, Medieval, Reformation, Modern); Orthodox/Catholic/Protestant; systematic/doctrinal; liberation/feminist/black; ecological theology; practical/pastoral/applied/liturgical; Intercultural/missiological/ecumenical; African/Asian/Celtic/Latin American.

**History:** The historical study of religion, including the history of the Christian churches (or church history), of non-institutional religion and of all religious traditions in their cultural, political and social contexts, in the ancient, medieval, early modern and modern eras.

**Religions:** Judaism, Christianity, Islam; Zoroastrianism, Bahai; Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism; Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto; 'Primal', indigenous religions, shamanism; Prehistoric, ancient religions in Greece, Rome, Egypt, near East; New religious movements, Paganism, New Age, folk and popular religions.

These studies would cover such topics as origin; development; history; spread; modern/mature form; key figures; schools, social and cultural forms; sacred texts and other literature; doctrines, philosophy, law, psychology; art, architecture, symbols; practices; institutions and organisations; a religion's presence in UK/Europe/the West, etc; interfaith dialogue.

**Religion:** Theories of religion; methods of study: comparative religion, phenomenology of religion, hermeneutics, dialogue, sociology of religion, anthropology of religion, religion and politics, psychology of religion, philosophy of religion: eg theism, evil, diversity of religions, afterlife; religious art, architecture, iconography and symbols; cross-religious themes, eg mysticism/meditation/spirituality, devotion/liturgy, religious experience, myth, pilgrimage, rites of passage, concepts of the sacred, monasticism, fundamentalism, violence, death; ethics in/and religion: nature of religious ethics, key values, and issues, such as the environment, war, economics, politics, bioethics; gender and religion; science and religion; modern and post-modern thought, religious and secular; religion and the media: film, literature, the internet; religious education; field-study of religious communities or places; regional studies: eg India, Central Asia, China, Japan, Africa, the Americas, Britain, Europe.

## **Appendix B - Membership of the review group for the subject benchmark statement for theology and religious studies**

Dr Darlene Bird	The Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies
Professor Brian Bocking	School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
Professor David Fergusson (Chair)	University of Edinburgh
Professor David Jasper	University of Glasgow
Dr Hugh Pyper (Secretary)	University of Sheffield
Professor Melissa Raphael	University of Gloucestershire
Dr Frank Trombley	University of Cardiff

## **Appendix C - Membership of the original benchmarking group for theology and religious studies**

Details provided below are as published in the original subject benchmark statement for theology and religious studies (2000).

Professor M Abdel Haleem	School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
Professor P Badham	University of Wales, Lampeter
Dr M Bowman	Bath Spa University College
Dr B E Gates	St Martin's College, Lancaster
Professor L L Grabbe	University of Hull
Dr C Hardman	University of Newcastle upon Tyne
Professor P Harvey	University of Sunderland
Professor J Hinnells (Co-chair)	University of Derby
Dr W Johnson	University of Wales, Cardiff
Professor J Lieu	King's College, University of London
Professor I Torrance	University of Aberdeen
Dr L J P Woodhead	University of Lancaster
Dr D F Wright	University of Edinburgh
Professor F M Young (Co-chair)	University of Birmingham

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