Subject Benchmark Statement

Theology and Religious Studies

March 2022

Contents

About this Statement

This document is a QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Theology and Religious Studies that defines what can be expected of a graduate in the subject, in terms of what they might know, do and understand at the end of their studies. Subject Benchmark Statements also describe the nature and characteristics of awards in a particular subject or area. Subject Benchmark Statements are published in QAA's capacity as a membership organisation on behalf of the higher education sector. A summary of the Statement is also available on the QAA website.

Key changes from the previous Subject Benchmark Statement include:

- a revised structure for the Statement which includes the introduction of cross-cutting themes of:
  - equality, diversity and inclusion
  - education for sustainable development
  - employability, entrepreneurship and enterprise education
- a comprehensive review updating the context and purposes of Theology and Religious Studies, including course design and content in order to inform and underpin the revised benchmark standards.

How can I use this document?

Subject Benchmark Statements are often used by higher education providers in the design and development of new courses in the relevant subject, as they provide a framework for specifying intended learning outcomes in an academic or vocational discipline. They are also used as a reference point when reviewing or revalidating degree courses. They may be used by external examiners in considering whether the design of a course and the threshold standards of achievement are comparable with other higher education providers. They also provide professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) with the academic standards expected of students.

Subject Benchmark Statements provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with a course but are not intended to represent a national curriculum in a subject or to prescribe set approaches to teaching, learning or assessment. Instead, they allow for flexibility and innovation in course design within a framework agreed by the subject community.

You may want to read this document if you are:

- involved in the design, delivery and review of courses in Theology and Religious Studies
- a prospective student thinking about undertaking a course in Theology and Religious Studies
- an employer, to find out about the knowledge and skills generally expected of Theology and Religious Studies graduates.

Relationship to legislation and regulation

The responsibility for academic standards lies with the higher education provider who awards the degree. Higher education providers are responsible for meeting the requirements of legislation and any other regulatory requirements placed upon them by their relevant funding and regulatory bodies. This Statement does not interpret legislation, nor does it incorporate statutory or regulatory requirements.

The regulatory status of the Statement will differ with regard to the educational jurisdictions of the UK. In England, Subject Benchmark Statements are not sector-recognised standards as set out under the Office for Students' regulatory framework. However, they are specified as a key reference point, as appropriate, for academic standards in Wales under Quality Assessment Framework for Wales and in Scotland as part of the Quality Enhancement Framework. Subject Benchmark Statements are part of the current quality requirements in Northern Ireland. Because the Statement describes outcomes and attributes expected at the threshold standard of achievement in a UK-wide context, many higher education providers will use them as an enhancement tool for course design and approval, and for subsequent monitoring and review, in addition to helping demonstrate the security of academic standards.

Additional sector reference points

Higher education providers are likely to consider other reference points in addition to this Statement in designing, delivering and reviewing courses. These may include requirements set out by PSRBs and industry or employer expectations. QAA has also published Advice and Guidance to support the Quality Code which will be helpful when using this Statement, for example, in course design, learning and teaching, external expertise and monitoring and evaluation.

Explanations of unfamiliar terms used in this Subject Benchmark Statement can be found in QAA's Glossary. Sources of information about other requirements and examples of guidance and good practice are signposted within the Statement where appropriate.

1   Context and purposes of a Theology and Religious Studies degree

Context

1.1   Courses within the broad area of Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) promote critical understanding and analysis of religion/religions in a global context. They are vital for understanding, navigating and changing the world in which we live - a world shaped in complex and diverse ways by religion and spirituality, and in which religious identities and diversity are constantly being negotiated.

1.2   Courses in this area enable critical examination of, relation to, and participation in religious cultures, communities and institutions, and in the societies shaped by them. They enable students to sharpen their understanding of people, cultures and societies within their own locality and experience, and in other cultural and historical contexts. They help students to engage critically with a variety of ways of seeing and acting in the world, including some that conflict with or challenge their own.

1.3   Within the field, there are lively debates about the definition of TRS. Even the term 'theology and religious studies' is contested, with some seeing it as a name for one internally differentiated discipline, and others seeing 'theology' and 'religious studies' as two distinct (although historically linked) disciplines.

1.4   These differing approaches overlap in complex ways with:

- differing stances towards the 'insider' or 'outsider' status of TRS scholars and students in relation to the religious communities they study (as well as challenges to any binary understanding of inside/outside)
- differing stances towards the evaluation of religious truth claims, and the bases on which those claims can (or should) be assessed and understood
- differing institutional contexts in which TRS is pursued.

1.5   Courses within the TRS area are offered by a wide range of higher education providers, with a variety of heritages, outlooks and identities. Aspects of TRS are also found as strands or units within larger departments, schools or colleges across the humanities and social sciences.

1.6   Courses within this area are often offered by general higher education providers, open to students of any religious or non-religious identity. They are also offered by providers with specific religious stances, offering courses for a variety of formational and training purposes - for example, training people for ministry in a religious community, or for chaplaincy work (single faith or multi-faith).

1.7   TRS provision is sometimes concentrated in a single department. That can be in combination with other disciplines - as in a department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion or Philosophy, Religion and History of Science, or other combinations. It can also be in departments focused entirely on TRS, which can go by a variety of names, including Theology and Religious Studies, Theology and Religion, Religion and Theology, Religious Studies, Study of Religion(s), Theology, and Divinity.

1.8   Similarly, courses can have any of these names, or many others. Titles combining Religion, Philosophy and Ethics are common. Some titles specify particular subject areas, such as Biblical Studies, Buddhist Studies, Islamic Studies, or Jewish Studies. Others identify courses designed for professional or vocational training or development, such as

Theology, Ministry and Mission, or Practical Theology in a religious context, or Religious Education in relation to teaching.

1.9   These courses may be studied as single honours, joint or combined honours, major-minor courses or within general degrees. Modules may also be open to students whose principal area of study lies elsewhere.

1.10   Because of the embeddedness of religion and spirituality in society and culture at large, there may be significant overlaps and synergies between courses within TRS and courses in subjects such as law, philosophy, social science, politics, classics, literature, archaeology, international relations, business (ethical finance), art, peace studies, and medicine.

Purposes of a Theology and Religious Studies degree

Reasons for studying TRS

1.11   The study of TRS can provide many benefits, including:

- the pursuit of a fascination with the subject matter: responding to the desire to understand, analyse and critique religious cultures, communities, institutions, identities, doctrines, beliefs and practices, as well as non-religion, atheism and the relationships between religions and secular culture
- training in a variety of theories and methods of study and engagement in critical analysis of relevant data and arguments
- promotion of a more sophisticated negotiation of our worlds, which are shaped in multiple and complex ways by religions, and shape religions in their turn
- the development of critically reflective and innovative practice within religious communities as those communities negotiate their relations to their traditions and their wider social and geographic contexts
- the acquisition of skills, dispositions and knowledge needed for specific roles, including the pursuit of clearly identified career paths (such as teaching, ministry, social work, community relations or international relations)
- a deepening of self-critical awareness and the understanding and interrogation of personal commitments, involvements, beliefs and worldviews, non-religious and religious
- the pursuit of opportunities for critical academic involvement in public debate, policy-making, and social change.

1.12   The acquisition of knowledge and understanding in this area will be transformative for many students, broadening their perspectives and often challenging or changing their attitudes. The study of TRS may have a profound impact on a student's life and outlook. It can contribute to their personal development and transform their horizons by leading them to engage with cultures and societies other than their own, whether ancient or modern. It can foster a lifelong quest for wisdom, respect for one's own integrity and that of others, examination of the beliefs, values and practices adopted for one's own life, and, not least, the challenging of prejudices.

Broader social purpose

1.13   The study of TRS contributes to community understanding and development, and the avoidance or challenging of prejudices arising from misinformation or misunderstanding. It can ensure that debates in the UK and beyond about matters of religion are well informed and of high quality, and based on competent religious literacy.

1.14   The fact that TRS graduates go into a wide variety of careers means that there is a pool of citizens with a sophisticated understanding of religion, able to contribute to debate in many areas of society. Such understanding can contribute to discussion of topics including international relations, community relations, human rights, social justice, wealth disparity, sustainability, climate change and the impact of the digital revolution.

1.15   Given the increasingly visible role of religion in the public sphere in recent decades, and the status religious identity has as a protected characteristic in the Equality Act, there are also increased calls for training courses in a variety of governmental and non-governmental organisations. Such courses are often aimed at training in cultural diplomacy and religious literacy or sensitivity, and partners include (among others) the Home Office, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, foreign governments, the military, the police, the civil service, education providers, youth workers, hospitals, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and funeral directors.

1.16   The study of TRS can also play a role within religious communities, promoting self-criticism, reflective practice, innovation, engagement across intra and inter-religious boundaries, a greater awareness of diversity, and a deeper awareness of global and local contexts. It can help shape the relationship between religious communities and wider society.

Employability

1.17   The qualities of mind and generic skills developed by the study of TRS are of value and relevance in both further study and employment.

1.18   TRS graduates are highly employable, offering multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary skills, detailed knowledge of diverse world views, and an ability to analyse and evaluate issues critically from a variety of perspectives.

1.19   Graduates will be equipped with the knowledge, understanding and practical skills to foster empathetic engagement with both familiar and unfamiliar viewpoints - crucial skills in a diverse society.

1.20   Graduates go into a wide range of employment sectors, which include the civil service, education, sales and advertising, human resources, management consultancy, publishing and journalism. Many find the critical understanding and practical community engagement necessary to study TRS to be an excellent entry into public-facing vocations such as teaching, social work, charities, policing, international relations, community relations, politics and local government.

1.21   Graduates from some TRS courses go on to employment in religious institutions and organisations, in a variety of religions. A Church Minister (integrated degree) Apprenticeship Standard was approved for delivery in 2019, covering training which equips students for ongoing professional ministry in a Christian context, enabling them to learn on the job while gaining a relevant degree (Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, 2019).

Equality, diversity and inclusion

1.22   Courses within the TRS area are designed to enable a wide range of students - from different religious and non-religious backgrounds, races, genders, sexualities, classes, regions, disabilities and ages - to realise their potential and to succeed. These courses foster an environment in which all students have a sense of belonging, and are free to engage in critical dialogue, exploring, challenging, critiquing, deconstructing and building on

established schemas and paradigms. Where an institution or course has a specific religious identity or stance, that will be made clear to all students, and students will have opportunities to examine, question and challenge that stance, and to consider alternative perspectives.

1.23   Courses within TRS promote acknowledgement of the complex identities, experiences and involvements that students and staff bring with them. Such courses encourage all students to consider perspectives other than their own, and enable staff and students to inform, collaborate with, discuss with and learn from one another.

1.24   As part of their commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion in relation to religion, race, disability, class, gender, sexuality, region and age, providers of courses within TRS increasingly take a decolonising approach to both content and pedagogy. This involves the diversifying of module content, readings, pedagogies, theoretical approaches and assessment design, ensuring that marginalised voices, traditions, religious identities and experiences are taken seriously, and that exclusion is minimised. It also involves the critical examination of dominant approaches to the discipline(s), for example where these privilege Eurocentric concepts and interpretive frameworks, attentive to the ways in which they can perpetuate exclusion.

1.25   TRS curricula also encourage critical awareness of the complex and sometimes problematic role that TRS itself has played and does play in framing categorisations of and responses to religions, religious groups and individuals across the globe.

Education for sustainable development

1.26   In the context of TRS, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) means attending to the ways that interdependent social, economic, cultural and environmental concerns intersect with religion and spirituality. ESD enhances the public impact, societal currency and professional value of TRS, using an environmental lens to complement and extend its existing focus on cultural diversity, social justice and global development (UNESCO, 2017; QAA and Advance HE, [Education for Sustainable Development Guidance](#)).

1.27   ESD encourages the development of knowledge and insight in relation to sustainable development, and its application to support action towards fairer and greener societies. An active learning approach recognises the role that religious professionals, spiritual communities and the interfaith movement can play in driving positive change for sustainability.

1.28   ESD can be promoted in TRS courses by aligning content, pedagogy and assessment with the eight UNESCO sustainability competencies. It involves:

- **Systems thinking competency** evaluating connections between environmental impacts and religious, spiritual and secular beliefs, practices and communities
- **Futures thinking competency** envisioning alternative pathways to more sustainable futures, reflecting the contribution of religion and spirituality as part of wider societal transformation
- **Critical thinking competency** understanding the roles of religious and spiritual actors in promoting and resisting sustainable development, and identifying dissonances between ideology and practice or belief and action
- **Strategic competency** identifying ways in which religious and spiritual professionals and organisations can exert influence, lead change and encourage action towards sustainability

- **Collaborative competency** engaging collaboratively with different religious, spiritual and non-religious groups to develop mutually beneficial ways of supporting progress on shared sustainability concerns
- **Problem-solving competency** applying religious or ethical perspectives, and values-led thinking, to the real-world challenges associated with sustainable development
- **Self-awareness competency** understanding the role of religious commitments, ideological influences and ethical traditions in shaping personal perspectives on sustainability
- **Normative competency** analysing the diversity of religious, spiritual and non-religious standpoints on environmental concerns, and the ways in which they can obstruct or support action on sustainability.

1.29   Given the importance and scale of the unevenly distributed effects of unsustainable development upon communities worldwide, there is an intrinsic link between ESD and the decolonising approach discussed in paragraphs 1.19-1.24.

Entrepreneurship and enterprise education

1.30   Enterprise and entrepreneurship education (EED) helps students develop behaviours, attributes and competencies that can contribute to their employment prospects, enable them to contribute more fully to society, and help them to lead a fulfilling life ([Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Education: Guidance for UK Higher Education Providers](#)). EED competencies have significant overlap with ESD, encouraging students to pursue innovation and beneficial change in existing systems and practices.

1.31   Courses within the TRS area can cultivate particular skills and attitudes relevant to EED, such as self-awareness and reflexivity, sensitivity to ethical, social and environmental values, the ability to question perceived limits, the ability to navigate diversity, and the ability to live with uncertainty and ambiguity. Assessments and learning tasks used in TRS courses can help students develop relevant attributes such as open-mindedness, curiosity, adaptability and determination, and relevant skills in communication, negotiation, leadership and digital literacy.

1.32   EED can be promoted in many ways in courses within TRS:

- short-term, semester-long or year-long work placements with external organisations
- modules on the application of TRS knowledge and skills in the workplace, which may include critical reflection on work placements
- practical, problem-based activities and challenges which may be set or assessed by community partners or other stakeholders
- teaching by practitioners, entrepreneurs and other specialists
- opportunities for theoretical reflection on students' and others' existing practice.

1.33   Some TRS courses prepare students for specific religious roles with an emphasis on innovation or entrepreneurship.

2 Distinctive features of a Theology and Religious Studies degree

Design

2.1 Courses within the TRS area take a number of different forms. In general, they may be divided into courses focused on breadth and courses focused on depth. Depth courses focus on a single religious or textual community, culture or identity, possibly including the study of relevant languages, while breadth courses provide students with opportunities to engage with multiple communities, cultures or identities. Each approach may be combined with elements of the other.

2.2 Both approaches are undertaken with an awareness that students may come from a variety of backgrounds, including non-religious and religious backgrounds, and have highly variable levels of prior knowledge of a given community, culture or identity.

2.3 The overlaps already noted between TRS and other disciplines, may lead to the development of strategic partnerships.

Accessibility

2.4 Students enter courses within the TRS area from a wide range of educational backgrounds.

2.5 While Religious Studies, Philosophy and Ethics are offered at many schools and can be studied to pre-university levels (A Level or Highers), access to courses within TRS does not generally depend on these qualifications. Previous study of arts, languages and humanities subjects can prepare students well for TRS, especially in terms of transferable skills in relation to essay writing and critical engagement with sources, but students enter TRS from other subject areas too. Access courses, bridging courses and year one support can assist students who have no prior experience of TRS, and are particularly important given the variable capacity in schools for specialist provision at pre-university levels.

2.6 A large number of students take courses within TRS as a second bachelor-level course because such courses are required as professional qualifications for entry into many religious leadership roles.

2.7 The availability of part-time, online, hybrid or blended forms of study can offer significantly increased access options for a variety of students, particularly those who may not be geographically near to a place of study, or who are unable to study full-time. Where a course is offered in different modes, care is taken to ensure a broad parity of experience for all students.

2.8 Many courses offer engagement with ancient and classical languages (including Arabic, Aramaic, Chinese, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Pali, Persian, Syriac, Sanskrit or Tibetan). These languages tend to be taught from beginners' level and are normally optional. Care is taken to ensure students have access to course materials that are accessible to them and compatible with any assistive technology they use.

2.9 All courses within TRS will be designed with a view to the needs of disabled students and with specific learning differences. This can include the provision of learning materials in multiple formats, the provision of multiple forms of engagement and assessment, and the provision of a wide range of options catering for different interests and aptitudes. Lecture and seminar materials are provided in an accessible manner to provide support for students with different visual or auditory requirements. Inclusive curriculum

design - that is, curriculum design that 'takes into account students' educational, cultural and social background and experience as well as the presence of any physical or sensory impairment and their mental well-being' (Morgan and Houghton, 2011: 5) - tends to be better for all students.

2.10   Courses within TRS often require fieldwork or placements, and these are made available in forms appropriate to disabled students, students with specific learning differences, students with caring responsibilities, or students who would otherwise lack the socioeconomic means to take part. Courses within TRS also often require discussion activities and other forms of interpersonal engagement, and these will be provided in a manner mindful of the needs of those on the autism spectrum or with social anxiety.

2.11   Courses within TRS are designed with sensitivity to the ways in which students may feel advantaged or disadvantaged by prior exposure to religious material, or equally feel empowered or disenfranchised by the way their identity, culture or community is treated. Specific consideration is given to the fact that the religious identities of students are protected characteristics.

Progression

2.12   Over the course of a degree with honours (FHEQ Level 6; FQHEIS Level 10) a TRS student will progress from one year of study to the next in line with the regulations and processes for each institution. It is expected that each year will see the attainment of certain levels of knowledge, expertise and experience that build towards the final achievement of meeting the threshold-level subject-specific and generic skills listed in this Statement.

2.13   Progression through these levels requires the acquisition of greater facility and competence (for example, in languages), greater depth or sharpness of focus and deepening intellectual maturity. It will also involve the acquisition of academic writing and research skills, enabling students to become increasingly independent learners and researchers. Single honours courses in the TRS area will generally provide the opportunity for a major project or dissertation as one way of ensuring that independence and intellectual maturity are attained.

2.14   Courses in the TRS area often have entry points at multiple levels, and caution is exercised when setting prerequisites so as not to create unnecessary barriers.

2.15   Upon graduation from an undergraduate degree, it would be expected that a student who had achieved a degree qualification would be equipped for undertaking postgraduate study in TRS or an associated discipline.

2.16   Joint honours undergraduates will achieve elements of the specific and generic skills for the subject but will add others according to the subjects covered in a joint course.

2.17   Integrated master's degrees (FHEQ Level 7; FQHEIS Level 11) are available in the UK and comprise a four-year full-time course or a part-time course of not less than five and not more than eight academic years. In a standard three-year undergraduate honours degree course, students may exit earlier and be eligible for a Certificate of Higher Education, a Diploma of Higher Education, or an honours degree depending upon the levels of study completed to a satisfactory standard. Scottish bachelor's degrees with honours are typically designed to include four years of study, which relates to the structure of Scottish primary and secondary education.

2.18   The availability of multiple exit points and associated awards can be particularly important where students are undertaking training for specific professional and vocational roles.

Partnership

2.19   Courses within TRS often involve engagement with religious communities. They may draw on members of religious communities to provide content; they may involve placements or fieldwork among such communities; they may attract students from such communities; they may provide professional or vocational training for members of such communities; they may be offered by institutions that have strong ties to such communities, or that are owned or run by religious institutions. Departments offering courses in TRS may also be called upon to validate courses offered by religious institutions.

2.20   The interface between academic study and religious communities can, however, be complex. Critical analysis may challenge profoundly held convictions and be perceived as disruptive or unwelcome. It can also be a major contributor to community understanding and development and the avoidance or challenging of prejudices arising from misinformation. The engagement between TRS courses and religious communities will always be conducted respectfully.

Monitoring and review

2.21   A major feature of academic quality assurance and enhancement at a higher education institution is having in place monitoring and regular review processes for the courses it delivers. Degree-awarding bodies routinely collect and analyse information and undertake periodic course review according to their own needs. They will draw on a range of external reference points, including this Statement, to ensure that their provision aligns with sector norms. In TRS, periodic review will be conducted with reference to issues of employability; for example, alignment with standards for initial teacher training.

2.22   Monitoring and evaluation is a periodic assessment of a course, conducted internally or by external independent evaluators. Evaluation uses information from both current and historic monitoring to develop an understanding of student achievement and inform future course planning.

2.23   Externality is an essential component of the quality assurance system in the UK. Higher education providers will use external reviewers as part of periodic review to gain an external perspective on any proposed changes and ensure threshold standards are achieved and content is appropriate for the subject.

2.24   External examination currently in use across the UK higher education sector also helps to ensure consistency in the way academic standards are secured by degree-awarding bodies. Typically, external examiners will be asked to comment on the types, principles and purposes of assessments being offered to students. They will consider the types of modules on offer to students, the outcomes of a cohort and how these compare to similar provision offered within the UK. External examiners produce a report each year and make recommendations for changes to modules and assessments (where appropriate). Subject Benchmark Statements, such as this one, can play an important role in supporting external examiners in advising on whether threshold standards are being met in a specific subject area. Courses with professional and vocational outcomes may also require evaluation and accreditation from professional and regulatory bodies. These are usually done through a combination of site visits and desk-based reviews.

2.25   Where courses within TRS are offered in partnership with faith bodies or governmental and NGOs, those bodies may have their own internal monitoring processes, and care is taken to ensure that these processes are accounted for in course design.

3   Content, structure and delivery

Content

Subject matter

3.1   The study of TRS involves a variety of methods, subjects and fields of study, clustered around the investigation and critical analysis of:

- the phenomena of religions and worldviews in general
- particular religious cultures, communities, institutions and identities.

3.2   In more detail, it is concerned with:

- religious communities, cultures and identities in all their global variety, interaction and dynamism, including both majority and minority religions in the UK context and globally
- non-religion, atheism and the relationships between religion(s) and secular culture
- the constant (re)negotiation of these identities and cultures in the world, their flux, interactions and conflicts, and religious hybridity and dual or multiple belonging
- the lived reality of religion or spirituality in all its complexity: the practices, institutions, lifestyles, beliefs, values, ethics, emotions, texts, discourses, material cultures, social arrangements, art, history and archaeology associated with religious or spiritual cultures, communities and institutions
- theories of religion, and critique of the concept
- the doctrines, beliefs, claims and arguments about transcendent or spiritual reality, the divine, God or the Gods, and about the world, that circulate within many of these communities and cultures
- the relation between philosophy and religious life and thought, including exploration of philosophical questions about religion, and religious responses to philosophical questions
- understandings of and approaches to human flourishing that circulate in and around many of these cultures and communities
- practices and understandings of ethics, morality and values in religious contexts
- literary, historical, sociological, theological, anthropological and hermeneutical study of specific bodies of religious texts, including ways in which they have been read, interpreted and engaged within diverse contexts
- the life, work and influence of major religious thinkers, prophets, teachers, ascetics, mystics, healers or leaders
- cross-religious themes such as mysticism, meditation, spirituality, devotion, worship, religious experience, myth, pilgrimage, rites of passage, concepts of the sacred, monasticism, fundamentalism, violence or death
- religion and the media, including film, literature and the internet
- religion and conflict or violence; religion and peace-making
- religion, science and technology
- religious education
- professional practice and innovation in a religious context.

3.3   Most courses within TRS include engagement with and response to contemporary issues and culture. This might include global perspectives, environmental change, the disparity between poverty and wealth, and inter-religious and intra-religious relations. It can involve opportunities to engage critically with gender, feminist, queer, Black, disability, postcolonial and liberationist studies within the context of widening cultural horizons, postmodernity, pluralism and globalisation.

3.4   Some courses within TRS include the study of languages, such as Arabic, Aramaic, Chinese, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Pali, Persian, Syriac, Sanskrit or Tibetan, to allow for a more nuanced understanding of different cultures, religions and philosophies.

3.5   Not every course within TRS will include all of these elements; different courses will combine them in different proportions. In all courses, however, it is essential that the subject matter be investigated in relation to questions of sustainability, and questions of inclusion and identity such as questions of gender, race, class, sexuality and postcoloniality.

Approaches

3.6   TRS involves a wide variety of approaches or methods, including, but not limited to, investigation and critical analysis of the following dimensions of religion/religious practice:

- anthropological
- artistic
- comparative
- cultural
- ethical
- feminist
- geographical
- historical
- linguistic
- pastoral
- phenomenological
- philological
- philosophical
- political
- practical
- psychological
- sociological
- textual
- theological

Interdisciplinary connections

3.7   The subjects from which theology and religious studies draws and to which it relates and contributes may include:

- anthropology
- archaeology
- area studies
- art history
- child and youth studies
- citizenship studies
- classics
- cultural studies
- disability studies
- economics
- education
- ethics
- ethnology
- gender studies and women's studies
- geography
- health studies
- heritage studies
- history
- human geography
- international relations
- language(s)
- law
- literature
- media studies
- material culture studies
- natural sciences
- peace and conflict studies
- philosophy
- political science
- postcolonial studies
- psychology
- sociology
- social policy and social work
- visual and performing arts

Teaching and learning

Overview

3.8 Courses in the TRS area employ a wide variety of teaching and learning methods, including:

- case studies
- fieldwork
- language classes
- lectures and presentations
- presentations in a variety of media, and discussing the presentations of other students
- projects (individual or group)
- reading (and accessing electronic information sources) with appropriate guidance
- role play or simulations

- seminars
- study placements
- study visits
- synchronous or asynchronous online discussion
- technology-based learning
- testimonials and group interview
- text-reading classes
- tutorials, supervisions or other small-group work
- work placements
- workshops

3.9 A number of other learning opportunities may be provided. In all cases, the careful articulation of aims and objectives and of expected learning outcomes is key to their effectiveness.

Specific modes of teaching and learning

3.10 **Lectures and presentations** enable tutors to provide an overview of a subject area, to offer a clear distillation of essential points, and to model the discussion and assessment of different views. Lectures provide students with a valuable opportunity to grasp the particular stance of a scholar, and to engage that scholar in discussion. Lectures are often recorded on a variety of media to provide opportunities for asynchronous watching or review.

3.11 **Seminars and tutorials**, whether on-site or online, enable intensive dialogue, debate and interaction with peers and tutors. This is vital for the pursuit of TRS because attending to people who understand things in a variety of different ways is a significant feature of the subject.

3.12 **Study visits and fieldwork** are incorporated into many courses to allow students to engage with the living practice of religion. Undertaking study visits and fieldwork enables interaction between experience and analysis. Students are encouraged to engage with the historical and contemporary material culture of religions. Reasonable adjustments for disabled students are arranged, according to requirement.

3.13 **Observation of religious practices and theoretical analysis of observed practices** sit alongside the study of texts and history.

3.14 **Group learning and peer learning** are central to many approaches to TRS. Participation in group discussion, analysis and presentation facilitates understanding and the development of skills in sharing and testing theories and ideas.

3.15 **Work-based learning** is a component of some TRS courses. Students may be encouraged to undertake activities that enhance their understanding of relevant employment opportunities. In professionally and vocationally focused courses, placements enable students to develop skills required for their future career.

3.16   **Reading of primary and secondary literature** is a key component of students' learning. Primary texts and peer-reviewed scholarship from a diverse range of authors and contexts are recommended in module guidance, and students are also expected to develop skills in sourcing appropriate material with discernment.

3.17   **Structured learning materials** on virtual learning platforms or other online media are available for students, and mechanisms for online engagement with the provider may include synchronous or asynchronous tutorial guidance. Students may also learn through synchronous and asynchronous online discussions or other activities.

Assessment

Purpose

3.18   All courses within TRS involve assessment. Students are asked to undertake a variety of tasks designed to enable them to develop and display a wide range of skills or literacies. The quality of their achievement of these tasks is assessed, and they receive feedback to help them develop. During their course, the completion of these tasks, and the receipt of feedback, will enable them to progress through the various levels of study. As they progress, students are encouraged to develop greater ability to work independently, especially by undertaking extended essays, longer projects or dissertations. Guidance for all assignments is provided in the form of clear descriptions of the activities involved and of the criteria for assessment, recommendations for learning resources of various kinds, and academic advice from tutors.

Relation to learning outcomes

3.19   Assessment is intended to ascertain that stated learning outcomes have been achieved. A variety of assessment methods enables students to demonstrate a variety of kinds of learning outcome.

Formative and summative

3.20   Summative assignments are those which contribute directly to a student's overall mark or grade for their module; formative assignments are those which do not. Formative assignments will provide students with opportunities to build the skills and understanding they will need in their summative assignments, and opportunities to receive feedback that will help them with that development.

Feedback

3.21   Feedback may be oral, provided in seminar or tutorial discussion or electronically, or written, for example, in email or electronic responses to online forums. It will normally be provided by tutors but can include elements of peer feedback. Formal feedback can be provided for both formative and summative assessment and is designed to show students whether and how they have met the relevant learning outcomes, what areas there might be for improvement, and what they might do to pursue that improvement.

Criteria

3.22   All assessment requires clear criteria against which students and tutors measure the achievement of learning outcomes. The objectives of assessment for all forms of submission are provided in course guidance documentation. Where there is group work and/or peer assessment, it is particularly important that the task and criteria are fully and carefully specified.

Assessment methods

3.23 The range of assessment methods used in theology and religious studies, and appropriate to the specified learning outcomes, include:

- analysis of survey material
- artistic creations
- assessed debates
- book and electronic resource reviews
- contributions to asynchronous online discussions
- dissertations
- documentary films
- essays or other written assignments
- fieldwork reports or presentations
- individual or group projects or other practical tasks, assessed directly and/or through reports or presentations
- language tests/examinations

- oral examinations
- oral presentations
- placement reports or presentations
- podcasts
- portfolios
- posters
- reflections on phenomenological exercises
- reflective journals
- seminar contributions
- textual analysis, making translations and conducting exegesis
- timed written examinations
- written theological reflections

Reasonable adjustments for disabled students are arranged, according to requirement.

3.24 Where students are allowed to select research topics for independent study, it may be necessary to negotiate appropriate modes of assessment.

3.25 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 may be used in the process of assessment, but other examiners may also be involved. Presentations may be recorded or filmed and made available to the external examiner.

4   Benchmark standards

Introduction

4.1   This Subject Benchmark Statement sets out the minimum threshold standards that a student will have demonstrated when they are awarded an honours degree in TRS. Demonstrating these standards over time will show that a student has achieved the range of knowledge, understanding and skills expected of graduates in TRS.

4.2   The vast majority of students will perform significantly better than the minimum threshold standards. Each higher education provider has its own method of determining what appropriate evidence of this achievement will be and should refer to Annex D: Outcome classification descriptions for FHEQ Level 6 and FQHEIS Level 10 degrees. This Annex sets out common descriptions of the four main degree outcome classifications for bachelor's degrees with honours - 1st, 2:1, 2:2 and 3rd.

4.3   Excellent students transcend the threshold standards and display originality, insight and the ability to progress to postgraduate research.

4.4   This document does not lay down a curriculum. The stated learning outcomes are indicative and do not form a checklist. It is not expected that all courses within TRS will necessarily lead to the attainment of all of these outcomes.

4.5   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. In vocationally focused courses, learning outcomes may include the development of skills, aptitudes and behaviours needed to practise as a religious professional. However, a student's personal spiritual development and religious outlook are not included in the criteria for the academic award.

Threshold level (3rd class)

Knowledge and understanding

4.6   On graduating with an honours degree within the area of TRS, students will be able to:

*   demonstrate comprehension of and critical engagement with the phenomena of religions and worldviews in general, and/or particular religious cultures, communities, institutions and identities

*   demonstrate comprehension of and critical engagement with non-religion, atheism, and the relationships between religion(s) and secular culture

*   demonstrate comprehension of and critical engagement with some of the following: the practices, institutions, lifestyles, beliefs, values, ethics, emotions, texts, discourses, material cultures, social arrangements, art, history and archaeology associated with the religious cultures, communities and institutions studied, and their connections to wider social and cultural structures, norms, aesthetics and aspirations

*   demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the constant (re)negotiation of religious identities and cultures, their flux, interactions and conflicts, and religious hybridity and dual or multiple belonging

- demonstrate comprehension of and critical engagement with key sources of the religion(s) or worldview(s) studied, and their interpretation in different historical periods and in different social or geographical settings

- demonstrate comprehension of and critical engagement with the beliefs, claims, and arguments about transcendent or spiritual reality, the divine, God or the gods, about the world, and about ethics and human flourishing that circulate in specified religious contexts

- demonstrate comprehension of and critical engagement with a range of themes, debates and methods within theology and religious studies

- make appropriate application of insights, themes and debates from theology and religious studies to broader interdisciplinary discussions, including, for example, in the humanities, social sciences, law or the physical, medical and biological sciences

- demonstrate awareness and critical assessment of religious contributions to debate in the public arena concerning, for example, beauty, class, disability, diversity, gender, health, identity, inclusion, justice, peace, postcoloniality, poverty, race, sustainability, truth and values.

Subject-specific and intellectual skills

4.7   On graduating with an honours degree within the area of TRS, students will be able to:

- Demonstrate intellectual flexibility through the practice of a variety of methods of study - for example, anthropological, archaeological, Black, comparative, dogmatic, empirical, exegetical, feminist, geographical, hermeneutical, historical, liberationist, linguistic, pastoral, phenomenological, philosophical, political, postcolonial, practical, psychological, queer, social scientific, speculative, systematic, and theological

- evaluate and critically analyse a wide range of primary and secondary sources, from diverse authors and contexts, including materials from theology and religious studies and, where appropriate, from related subject areas

- demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of how personal and communal identities and motivations are shaped by religion, how this has both positive and negative effects, and how important such identities are

- demonstrate sensitive awareness of the conviction and claims to certainty that may arise in religious and non-religious cultures, communities and institutions, with their positive and negative effects

- demonstrate awareness of and sensitivity to voices and discourses that have been and are marginalised within cultures, communities and institutions, within public discourse about religion, and in the discipline(s) of TRS, and demonstrate awareness of the sources of this marginalisation

- in professional, vocational and ministerial courses, demonstrate ability as a sophisticated, creative and critically informed practitioner, in complex and unpredictable contexts.

Generic skills

4.8   On graduating with an honours degree within the area of TRS, students will be able to:

- communicate information, ideas, arguments, principles and theories to an intended audience by a variety of means - for example, by appropriate oral and visual

means, by written work of various kinds and lengths, and by dissertations or extended projects that are clearly and effectively organised and presented

- show independence in thought, and critical self-awareness about their own outlooks, commitments and prejudices
- present arguments for their own views while acknowledging, representing fairly, reflecting on and interacting with the views of others
- engage with the convictions and behaviours of others with empathy, integrity and critical reflection
- 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 or self-directed study or learning (including time management) and reflect on their strengths and weaknesses as learners
- identify, gather and analyse primary data and source material, whether through textual studies or fieldwork
- make appropriate use of a full range of resources in order to identify appropriate source material, compile bibliographies, inform research and enhance presentations
- use technology and computer skills appropriately to identify appropriate source material and data, support research, and enhance presentations.

5   List of references and further resources

Association of University Departments of Theology and Religious Studies (2005) Framework of Professional Practice
basr.ac.uk/ethics/

Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (2019) Church Minister (Integrated Degree)
www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/apprenticeship-standards/church-minister-(integrated-degree)-v1-0

Morgan, Hannah and Houghton, Ann-Marie (2011) Inclusive Curriculum Design in Higher Education: Considerations for Effective Practice Across and Within Subject Areas, Higher Education Academy
www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/inclusive-curriculum-design-higher-education

QAA (2018) Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Education:
Guidance for UK Higher Education Providers
www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/about-us/enterprise-and-entrpreneurship-education-2018.pdf

QAA and Advance HE (2021) Education for Sustainable Development Guidance: Executive Summary
www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/education-for-sustainable-development-guidance-executive-summary.pdf

UNESCO (2017) Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives
unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000247444

6 Membership of the Advisory Groups for the Subject Benchmark Statement for Theology and Religious Studies

Membership of the Advisory Group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for Theology and Religious Studies (2022)

Professor Mike Higton (Chair)	Durham University
Revd Dr Keith Beech-Gruneberg	The Archbishops Council of the Church of England
Professor Susannah Cornwall	University of Exeter
Professor Derrik Ferney	QAA Officer
Revd Professor Drew Gibson	Union Theological College, Belfast
Edd Graham-Hyde	University of Central Lancashire
Dr Stephen Gregg	University of Wolverhampton
Professor Tom Greggs	University of Aberdeen
Dr Elvis Imafidon	School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
Revd Dr Manon James	St Padarn's Institute
Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal	University of Birmingham
Professor Hugh Pyper	University of Sheffield
Dr Alex Ryan	University of Gloucestershire
Dr Sonya Sharma	University College London
Amy Spencer	QAA Coordinator
Professor Emma Tomalin	University of Leeds
Professor Alana Vincent	University of Chester
Professor Catrin Williams	University of Wales Trinity Saint David

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Membership of the Advisory Group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for Theology and Religious Studies (2019)

The fourth edition, published in 2019, was revised by QAA to align the content with the revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education, published in 2018. Proposed revisions were checked and verified by a member of the review group of the Subject Benchmark Statement for Theology and Religious Studies from 2014.

Dr Hannah Bacon	University of Chester
Dr Andy Smith	QAA

Membership of the Advisory Group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for Theology and Religious Studies (2014)

Details provided below are as published in the third edition of the Subject Benchmark Statement.

Dr Marion Bowman (Chair)	The Open University
Dr Nick Adams	University of Edinburgh
Dr Hannah Bacon	University of Chester
Dr Elizabeth Burns	Heythrop College, University of London
Dr Dominic Corrywright	Oxford Brookes University

Dr John Curran	Queen's University Belfast
Professor Mike Higton	Durham University
Dr Peter McGrail	Liverpool Hope University
Professor Hugh Pyper	University of Sheffield/Higher Education Academy
Professor Melissa Raphael	University of Gloucestershire
Professor Bettina Schmidt	University of Wales Trinity St David
Harriet Barnes	QAA Officer
Dr Eeva John (Employer Representative)	Archbishop's Council
Iona Hine (Student Reader)	University of Sheffield

Membership of the Advisory Group for the annex to cover master's degrees in Theology and Religious Studies

Details provided below are as published in the third edition of the Subject Benchmark Statement.

Dr George D Chryssides (Chair)	University of Birmingham
Dr Marion Bowman	The Open University
Dr Dominic Corrywright	Oxford Brookes University
Dr Wendy Dossett	University of Chester
Professor Ron Geaves	Liverpool Hope University
Professor David Jasper	University of Glasgow
Dr Leon Litvack	Queen's University, Belfast
Dr Peter McGrail	Liverpool Hope University
Professor Jolyon Mitchell	University of Edinburgh
Dr Rachel Muers	University of Leeds
Professor Bettina Schmidt	University of Wales, Trinity Saint David
Dr Andrew Village	York St John University
Dr Stuart Weeks	Durham University

Membership of the Advisory Group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for Theology and Religious Studies (2007)

Details provided below are as published in the second edition of the Subject Benchmark Statement.

Professor David Fergusson (Chair)	University of Edinburgh
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 Jasper	University of Glasgow
Dr Hugh Pyper (Secretary)	University of Sheffield
Professor Melissa Raphael	University of Gloucestershire
Dr Frank Trombley	Cardiff University

Membership of the Advisory Group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for Theology and Religious Studies (2000)

Details provided below are as published in the original Subject Benchmark Statement.

| Professor J Hinnells (Co-chair) | University of Derby |
| Professor F M Young (Co-chair) | University of Birmingham |

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
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

Appendix A: Taught master's degrees

A1   The nature and extent of taught master's degrees

There are many different taught master's degrees in the TRS area. While the same qualification may be pursued by different students for different purposes, it is possible to identify several broad categories of award. These are not mutually exclusive.

- Some provide **professional qualifications** for specialist vocational skills, such as counselling, chaplaincy, health and well-being, death studies and inter-religious relations. Some qualifications in this category may be sufficient for a specific religious body to give accreditation to a successful student to practise in a particular role.
- Others enable **specialism** in areas not covered in such depth at undergraduate level, for example, Reformed Theology, Western Esotericism, Buddhist Studies. Such qualifications enable students to take their undergraduate expertise to a more advanced level.
- Some offer a **broader curriculum** for the student, for example, a World Religions course for students whose undergraduate course was confined to a single religion.
- Some focus on the **development of research skills** and may be particularly attractive to students who are considering subsequent doctoral work.

A2   The naming of master's degrees

There is a wide range of nomenclature used for master's degrees in the area of TRS.

Some forms are used generically across a range of subject areas. MPhil (Master of Philosophy), MLitt (Master of Letters) and MRes (Master of Research) generally involve substantial independent research, requiring an extended dissertation. They may include taught components, for which this Subject Benchmark Statement may be a useful point of reference.

For taught master's awards, MA (Master of Arts) and MSt (Master of Studies) are the most commonly used forms, with MSc (Master of Science) also in use. These titles may also be used to describe integrated master's degrees.

There are some qualifications that are awarded exclusively for work in theology and religious studies, notably MTh (Master of Theology) and MDiv (Master of Divinity). MDiv and MTh awards tend to focus on Christian studies, though there is no reason why a provider could not offer such courses focused upon another religion or religions.

In general, an MDiv award has tended to indicate a fairly broad curriculum (often encompassing five disciplines often required for Christian ministry: Old Testament, New Testament, systematic theology, church history and pastoral theology), and may be a qualification leading to ordination. The MTh has tended to be more specialised, typically focusing on a single field of study within Christian theology and/or biblical studies, for example, Reformed Theology, Orthodox Studies or Theology and the Arts. An MTh award may involve development of practical skills as well as academic knowledge: some higher education providers offer MTh awards in Chaplaincy Studies, Preaching, and Inter-faith Studies.

MMin (Master of Ministry) characteristically signifies more practical ministry training.

Master's degrees which are primarily designed as qualifications in other subject areas may include curriculum content drawn from TRS. Qualifications of this type may be titled, for

example, MEd, MSc or LLM (education, social sciences and law, respectively). These degrees generally draw predominantly on the Subject Benchmark Statement for the primary field of study, but this Subject Benchmark Statement may form an additional reference point.

Note that the Master of Arts (MA) granted by the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge is not an academic qualification. The title Master of Arts with Honours (MA (Hons)) is used in some Scottish contexts for the Scottish bachelor's degree with honours. Some institutions also grant honorary master's degrees. None of these fall within the scope of the present document.

A3   Intended entrants

While many applicants for master's degrees already have an undergraduate qualification in the TRS area, others have qualifications in other subjects that include relevant subject knowledge and/or prior experience or have relevant professional expertise with some academic training (such as ministers of religion).

Providers ensure that those who embark on a master's degree have the relevant academic skills and are capable of work in TRS at the appropriate academic level. The undergraduate benchmark standards set out in section 4 above indicate the kinds of knowledge, understanding and skills likely to be required, but applicants for master's degrees will need to have demonstrated these at higher than threshold level. Where appropriate, refresher or transitional courses may be considered.

In general, master's degrees in the TRS area should be open to all students, irrespective of religious belief, gender, race, sexuality and disability. They are subject to equalities legislation and the equal opportunities policies of higher education providers. Where a course is provided as a form of training for work within particular religious bodies, however, religious affiliation may be a genuine occupational requirement for that work and so for the training involved. Where this is the case, the nature of the programme will be made clear to all applicants, and students will still have opportunities to examine, question and challenge the stance of that religious body, and to consider alternative perspectives.

A4   Teaching and learning

Master's degrees in TRS cover the same wide range of topics and themes as set out in paragraph 3.1 above. They are characterised by the development of critical engagement and reflection, methodological sophistication and advanced research skills.

Students are expected to demonstrate that they have considered the ethical issues raised by their study, and in particular by their research. They are made aware of relevant standards, such as the Association of University Departments of Theology and Religious Studies' Framework of Professional Practice.

Students are introduced to a range of research and study tools, which may include field work, placements and the development or application of language skills.

Elements of a master's degree may sometimes be made available to undergraduates as 'challenge modules', designed to introduce them to postgraduate study.

A5   Assessment

Master's degrees can include the range of assessment types set out in paragraph 3.23 above. For master's level courses in TRS, assessment by coursework is now more common

than traditional examinations, with the methods of assessment reflecting designated learning outcomes.

At least one piece of extended research is a common expectation, typically as the final element of assessment for the course. Generally, this will be a major project, extended essay or dissertation, showing evidence of original independent research and enabling the student to develop high-level academic skills. This piece of work may be literature-based or involve the collection and analysis of empirical data.

Assessed work at master's level has a critical, investigative dimension. While some master's degrees may involve a substantial element of skills development, they will still involve such a dimension, and extensive critical engagement with scholarship in the relevant field.

Assessment does not involve evaluating students' confessional stances. While religious organisations may have confessional expectations, especially in cases where they are sponsoring a student's study, personal spiritual development and religious outlook are not included in the criteria for the award of the degree.

A6   Benchmark standards

A master's degree in the TRS area is awarded to students who, during their course, have demonstrated (in addition to the standards for an honours degree specified in section 4 above) many of the following:

- a high degree of independence and self-direction in learning, taking responsibility for their own learning experience, and finding many of their own learning resources
- knowledge of appropriate research methods and employment of appropriate research skills
- sophisticated analysis of relevant original/primary sources and secondary literature
- the skills necessary for the production of original research (although the degree of originality appropriate to doctoral research is not expected at this level of study), with an ability to adopt a critical distance from their source material and to evaluate it critically, reaching their own independent conclusions
- critical awareness of the complexity of the subject matter, and the range of sources that are appropriate to their work
- critical reflection on the paradigms and perspectives that they employ, with a view to ameliorating the forms of marginalisation and exclusion implicated in them
- an understanding of the ethical issues raised by their research, and compliance with relevant codes of practice
- an ability to evaluate critically and employ online resources and tools for study and research.