



## Religious Studies

### Final Assessment Report & Implementation Plan March 2020

<b>Faculty / Affiliated University College</b>	King's University College
<b>Degrees Offered</b>	B.A.
<b>Modules Reviewed</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Religion &amp; Society (formerly Religious Studies) Honours Specialization, Specialization, Major</li> <li>World Religions &amp; Cultures Honours Specialization, Specialization, Major</li> <li>Catholic Studies for Teachers (CST) Honours Specialization, Major</li> <li>Catholic Studies Honours Specialization, Specialization, Major</li> </ul>
<b>External Consultants</b>	<p>Dr. Eileen Schuller, Professor Emerita, Department of Religious Studies, McMaster University</p> <p>Dr. Stephen Scharper, Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto Mississauga</p>
<b>Internal Reviewer</b>	Dr. Geoff Read, Provost and Dean of Arts and Social Science, Huron University College
<b>Date of Site Visit</b>	March 5-6, 2020
<b>Evaluation</b>	<b>Good Quality</b>
<b>Approval Dates</b>	<p>SUPR-U: January 20, 2021</p> <p>SCAPA: February 3, 2021</p> <p>Senate (for information only): February 12, 2021</p>
<b>Year of Next Review</b>	Year of next cyclical review – 2027-28

### **Overview of Western’s Cyclical Review Assessment Reporting Process**

In accordance with Western’s Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP), the Final Assessment Report (FAR) provides a summary of the cyclical review, internal responses, and assessment and evaluation of the undergraduate modules delivered by the **Department of Religious Studies, King’s University College.**

This report considers and reports on the following documents: the program’s self-study, the external consultants’ report and the responses from the Department and the Associate Dean of Science.

This Final Assessment Report (FAR):

- i) provides an Executive Summary of the Review Process, including an overview of the Department as outlined in the Self-Study brief;
- ii) identifies the strengths of the program;
- iii) identifies opportunities for program enhancement and improvement; and,
- iv) prioritizes the recommendations of the external consultants in the Implementation Plan.

The Implementation Plan details the recommendations from the Final Assessment Report that are required for implementation, identifies who is responsible for approving and acting on the recommendations, outlines any action or follow-up that is required, and provides the timeline for completion.

The Final Assessment Report and Implementation Plan is sent for approval through SUPR-U, SCAPA, Senate and the Ontario Universities’ Council on Quality Assurance and is made available on a publicly accessible location on Western’s IQAP website. The Final Assessment Report with the Implementation Plan is the only document resulting from the undergraduate cyclical review process that is made public; all other documents are confidential to the Program/School/Faculty and SUPR-U.

**Executive Summary** (as identified in the Self-Study Brief)<sup>1</sup>

**Overview**

King's University College, a Catholic co-educational institution, is one of three University Colleges academically affiliated with The University of Western Ontario.

Originally linked with Philosophy, the Department of Religious Studies at King's became a separate department in 2017. There are seven full-time faculty as well as five part-time faculty with about 70 to 80 students enrolled in years two through four. According to the Self-Study brief, the mission of the department is

*to foster intercultural and interreligious understanding and dialogue not only among students in our programs, but more broadly across the student body through elective courses, aligning with King's strategic plan "as the centre of Catholic higher education in the Diocese of London and in the Church in Canada, as well as a resource on the Catholic intellectual tradition for the Catholic and non-Catholic community."*

The Religious Studies Department offers several modules:

1. Catholic Studies for Teachers
2. Catholic Studies
3. Religion & Society (formerly Religious Studies)
4. World Religions & Cultures
5. Jewish Studies
6. Islamic Studies

As well several non-modular courses (first-year level) are offered as electives to the general student population who are not specializing in Religious Studies.

The faculty note that

*Although the relationship of religious studies and theology as disciplines can be highly controversial, within the department at King's we find this diversity of approaches to be a source of enrichment. And whether engaged in more descriptive or more normative discourses in the study of religion, our faculty bring deep, lived connections to the traditions we study and teach.*

Learning Outcomes for each module align with Western's Learning Outcomes and focus on Historical-Mindedness, Critical questioning of methodological categories, and Interdisciplinarity. The faculty have

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<sup>1</sup> Direct quotes from the review materials are noted in italics; otherwise all comments are summarized. s

been involved in intensive curriculum mapping exercises to ensure that content in each course has been tied directly to meeting the Learning Outcomes. Assessment of students is diverse, drawing on open-ended/long-answer test questions; closed or short-answer test questions; critical analysis; essays; research proposal/report; assessment of discussion, and participation with an emphasis on critical and creative writing.

The student body is diverse in background and beliefs with an increasing presence of international students. Teaching faculty report high student ratings on teaching effectiveness.

**Strengths/Innovations of the Program** (as identified in the brief)

- quality of instruction
- small class sizes
- accessibility to faculty and staff for students
- respectful and supportive community atmosphere
- experiential learning opportunities
- students of diverse cultural backgrounds and religious traditions
- development of interreligious and thematic rather than tradition-specific courses
- dynamic Library support and resources

**Challenges for the Department:** (as identified in the brief)

- recruiting students and increasing enrolment

**Self-Study Process**

The self-study document was a collective effort involving participation from all members of the Department of Religious Studies at King's University, College. Multiple faculty meetings were designated for the purposes of reviewing the undergraduate modules and resulted in the recent mapping of the curriculum to the Learning Outcomes as described in the brief. Through recent and ongoing curriculum revision all program offerings have been reviewed. In addition, feedback about the effectiveness of the curriculum was solicited from students, and alumni. The Self-Study brief notes that irrespective of the cyclical review process,

*Members of the Department are in a continual mode of reflection on what we aspire to offer our students, how best to deliver on these aspirations, and how to build on the strengths of our department.*

## **Review Process**

During the external review, the review committee (comprised of the two external reviewers and one internal reviewer) were provided with Volumes I and II in advance of their visit and then met over two days with:

- John Doerksen, Vice Provost (Academic Programs)
- Karen Campbell, Vice Provost (Academic Planning, Policy and Faculty Relations)
- David Malloy, Principal, King's University College
- Sauro Camiletti, Vice-Principal and Academic Dean,
- Mark Yenson, Chair, Department of Religious Studies
- Simone Shepherd, Academic Program Advisor for Religious Studies
- Faculty, Department of Religious Studies
- Students, Department of Religious Studies
- Adrienne Co-Dyre, Director of Libraries (Subject Librarian for Religious Studies)
- Administrative Staff, Department of Religious Studies

The reviewers also engaged in a tour of the campus building, observing the facilities that support teaching, learning, and research.

Following the onsite review, the external reviewers submitted a comprehensive report of their findings which was sent to the Chair and the Dean for review and response. These formative documents, including Volumes I and II of the Self-Study, the External Report, and the Faculty response, have formed the basis of this summative assessment report of the Religious Studies undergraduate program.

## **Summative Assessment – External Reviewers' Report**

*Overall, the Religious Studies department strikes us as a well-run, collegial, and professional environment. This speaks to the fine leadership of the departmental chair, Dr. Mark Yenson, the hiring acumen of previous departmental leadership, as well as the congenial spirit of the faculty and professionalism of the administrative and library staff. King's is to be commended for fostering such a welcome spirit of fruitful cooperation.*

*It was a pleasure to encounter such a positive work environment, which makes the prospect of effectively implementing any proposed changes all the more sanguine.*

## **Strengths of the Program**

- Program quality
- A well-run, collegial, and professional environment
- Experiential learning opportunities

- *Among the strengths we noticed in the department were the excellence and creativity of the faculty, their dedication to teaching, and their authentic concern for the students. In our lively meeting with the students, for example, many commented on how much they enjoy the professors and how interesting they find their courses. There seemed to be general agreement that the pedagogy in the department was both engaging and enlightening.*

### **Challenges for the Program**

- Recruitment and increased enrolment of students

### **Summary Statement**

*We recognize that the Catholic Studies for Teachers program is a unique one and has been a distinguishing feature of King's. It serves to integrate the university with the local and regional separate schools and parishes. Moreover, it provides a successful, proven model of the experiential education currently being advocated by Western University and the Ontario government. In this, King's has been a pioneer within an important educational horizon.*

**Summary of the Reviewers’ Key Recommendations and Department/Faculty Responses**

<b>REVIEWERS’ RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>DEPARTMENT/DECANAL RESPONSE</b>
<p>Recruiting students and increasing student enrolment in Religious Studies is an extant issue across Canada.</p> <p><i>The future of these programs, we suggest, rests in the extent they can generate greater student interest, receive strategic structural support from the highest levels of the college and university, and mount courses that speak not only to the backgrounds of the changing student body but also the key social, economic, cultural, ethical, ecological, ontological, and spiritual concerns of the present</i></p>	<p>“Given the broader situation of the Humanities, we also concur wholeheartedly with the observation that “any strategies for enhancing enrolment in such programs must also ... involve university-wide structural and systemic alterations as well as changes at the departmental level.”</p>
<p><i>The advertisement of courses. Although much good work has been done in the past, there may be new avenues to explore, especially in terms of the new online realities. The establishment of a specific Publicity Committee within the departmental structure may give this a priority and enable the work of faculty in this area to be appropriately recognized.</i></p>	<p>Open to consideration</p>
<p><i>As plans develop for an increasing attention to Indigenous Studies – including drawing upon whatever resources may be provided through Western’s initiatives in this area – it will be important to ensure that this component is incorporated into the Catholic Studies for Teachers module.</i></p>	<p>“The revised curriculum for Catholic education in Ontario includes increased emphasis on Indigenous Studies, and inclusion of Indigenous content and perspectives in the Catholic Studies for Teachers modules makes our program more responsive to the needs of future Catholic educators. We see possibilities for integrating Indigenous perspectives and resources connected to educational curricula into the Catholic Studies for Teachers practicum seminars.”</p>
<p><i>In our discussion with the students, it became clear that there are very divergent reactions to online courses, some students asking for more, some asking for less. Especially in light of the current pandemic situation and the move to more online courses it will be essential to monitor closely the reaction and needs of all students in adapting to this new reality.</i></p>	<p>“In the present situation, we will continue to monitor student engagement and accessibility, while recognizing that the signature pedagogy at King’s emphasizes personal contact and community.”</p>
<p><i>A major concern voiced by students was in the area of academic advising. While they were very satisfied with the advice and direction that they received from individual professors when these are approached, there is concern about the accuracy and completeness of the information</i></p>	<p>“Within the department, the chair has increased his level of involvement and communication with the Academic Dean’s Office and specifically with the Academic Program Advisor (for example, through regular check-ins and enhanced</p>

<p><i>that is being given to them from other administrators. Given the way that advising is handled at King’s and the need for advisors to be acquainted with the details of a number of different departments, this seems an area that needs attention at a level beyond the department.</i></p>	<p>collaboration on the communications sent out to students).”</p>
<p><i>If suggestions are followed through for the development of new courses that are more interdisciplinary and involve other professors from King’s and even Western in co-teaching, there are issues that will need attention around adequate credit given for co-teaching and new course development.</i></p>	<p>“We have already adapted several courses that fit well into the Religion &amp; Society modules and address important societal issues; the relevance of these courses has become even more apparent in the last months, given the worldwide pandemic and the socio-economic inequalities it has exposed, and given heightened attention to issues of racism and xenophobia. Courses such as RS/SJPS 3360F/G, <i>Islam, Peace and Justice</i>; RS 3452F/G, <i>Globalization, Justice, and Spirituality</i>, and RS 3453F/G: <i>Suffering, Grief, and Injustice</i> (among others) speak to these urgent questions.” ...Others of the reviewers’ recommended course topics, of course, would necessitate drawing on expertise from other fields, not only in the social sciences but in the “hard” sciences. While we see the value in these general-interest interdisciplinary courses and the contribution they might make to increasing enrolment among international and STEM-oriented students, we want to be careful that we are playing to our strengths as teacher-scholars and as a department.</p>
<p><i>In general, we were hearing a favourable response to expending the Catholic Studies for Teachers to include the Primary-Junior levels.</i></p>	<p>“We have explored this possibility in dialogue with the Faculty of Education, but the Faculty of Education is unable to accommodate this proposal. The department therefore will continue to consider other means of supporting students who seek to enter the Primary-Junior stream in Education, since several area Catholic school boards have reaffirmed the need for well-formed Catholic primary-junior teachers and look to King’s as an important partner. One possibility would be the introduction of a certificate in Catholic Studies for students interested in primary-junior education in the Catholic system.”</p>

**Other Opportunities for Program Improvement and Enhancement**

In addition to the recommendations, the review process identified other considerations to enhance or enrich the program.

- Consideration of courses in environment and sustainability *to explore the deep interconnection of human and nonhuman reality*
- Presentations at conferences to highlight the faculty nationally and internationally
- Development of annual lecture focusing on world religions.

**Implementation Plan**

The Implementation Plan provides a summary of the recommendations that require action and/or follow-up. The Department Chair/Director, in consultation with the Dean of the Faculty/Affiliated University College Principal will be responsible for monitoring the Implementation Plan. The details of progress made will be presented in the Deans’ Annual Report and filed in the Office of the Vice-Provost (Academic).

Recommendation	Proposed Action and Follow-up	Responsibility	Timeline
1. Include Indigenous content, particularly in the Catholic Studies for Teachers modules	Respond to need created by revised Catholic education curriculum; integrate content into senior seminars in particular	Chair of the program	September 2022
2. Ensure students are receiving good information and guidance from academic advising	Chair to communicate program requirements and needs clearly with academic advising	Chair of the program	Immediately and ongoing
3. Consider diverse recommendations for increasing student enrolment (e.g., more interdisciplinary modules/courses)	Discussion within the department, follow up to be determined thereafter	Chair of the program; academic dean.	Ongoing
4. Consider development of more programming around the theme of religion and the environment	Discussion within the department, follow up to be determined thereafter	Chair of the program	Ongoing