

<b>Institution: SOAS</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: 33 Theology and Religious Studies</b>
<p><b>a. Context</b></p> <p>Religion is a major driving force in social and political transformations, helping to shape the approach and actions of a wide range of groups in relation to both global and local challenges. As a result, the external impact of the discipline of the Study of Religions is increasingly significant. Over the period 2008-13, the Department of the Study of Religions at SOAS has had an impact on a range of non-academic user groups and other beneficiaries and audiences both in the UK, as well as in our specialist regions of Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Key user groups have been civil society organisations including within religious communities (Anti-Caste Discrimination Alliance), public bodies (British Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, London Jewish Museum, Al-Sabah collection Kuwait, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington DC.), auction houses (incl. consultancies for Christie's and Bonham's), government departments (NHS, Law Courts; Bureau of Intelligence and Research of the US Department of State; The National Intelligence Council, Washington DC; Embassy of Ireland to Israel; Equalities and Human Rights Commission UK), non-HE educational providers, private sector companies (Art Dealers, Booksellers), and specific sections of the general public in a number of regions and countries.</p> <p>The main types of impact have been to apply the insights of knowledge created in research to creative and cultural sectors (museums, art galleries, auction houses, art dealers); informing the form or content of education beyond HE (cinema, theatre, television, radio, newspapers); extending and improving the quality of evidence, argument and expression to enhance public understanding; improving the delivery of public services; informing and influencing the nature of public policy by providing evidence in law cases (Hunter), training ambassadors to countries suffering from civil unrest due to religious strife (Hezser), equality and human rights (Hunter); creating and interpreting cultural capital. In particular, impact was achieved in relation to particular research clusters and themes, especially certain religious minorities studies (e.g. Flügel, Hintze, Hunter, Stewart), and in the study of religious extremism and terrorism (e.g. Hartung providing expert information on the Tablighi Jama'at London bombing plot). Nonetheless, as is common across the sector, researchers in the Department are not exclusively focused on an external impact agenda, with individual scholarship remaining an important part of our mission.</p>
<p><b>b. Approach to impact</b></p> <p>During the period 2008-2013 the Department has taken a multi-pronged approach to interacting with non-academic users. This has included collaboration with non-academic users and beneficiaries in the development and implementation of specific research projects; wider structured engagement with external groups; and also serendipitous exchange. Individual members of staff in the Department also undertook 'third stream' activity that draws upon their research and applies it to the public domain, notably as expert witnesses in asylum cases.</p> <p>One way in which non-academic users are incorporated into research activities is through their involvement as advisors to major research projects or initiatives. For example, work by Hintze and Stewart on Zoroastrianism, the religion of pre-Islamic Iran, which is still practised by ca. 120,000 individuals world-wide, has actively engaged with different sections of a deeply divided, microscopic religious community. This has resulted in the endowment of a Chair in Zoroastrianism at SOAS, the only one of its kind world-wide and an annual lecture in memory of a distinguished Zoroastrian (Kutar Memorial Lecture) that is attended by the wider Zoroastrian community in London and beyond. This engagement has also led to financial support for a conference series (The Idea of Iran) at SOAS, the publication of conference proceedings, and most recently the preparation and mounting of a major exhibition on Zoroastrianism in the Brunei Gallery in London in autumn 2013. This exhibition was reported widely in the national and international press (including The Times, Wall Street Journal Europe, Asian Art Newspaper, Eastern Art Europe), blogs (British Library, and two major radio broadcasts were BBC Radio 2 and also London 94.9 with Stewart). It considerably raised the profile and public awareness of this religion not least through external sponsorship of an advertising campaign, sponsored with ca. £35,000 by the Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe, at various London Underground stations. Similarly, in 2012, the Centre for Jaina Studies worked with the US-based Dancing Star Foundation, and the Jiv Daya Foundation, to organise a major symposium on religious perspectives on biodiversity and animal rights. To make this and the subsequent symposium on 'Jaina Logic' accessible to a wider public, the edited proceedings of these two conferences were filmed, edited and put online on the SOAS website,</p>

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funded by the two external collaborating foundations. Our research centres and groups also work with external advisors to increase their reach: thus the Circle of Tibetan and Himalayan Studies, coordinated within the Department, has a five-person advisory group that includes a representative from the International Dunhuang Project at the British Library, a major international collaboration that seeks to make information and images of all manuscripts, paintings, textiles and artefacts from Dunhuang and archaeological sites of the Eastern Silk Road freely available on the Internet.

Another route, increasingly followed in line with research council practice, is for an impact plan to be developed at the outset of a project that identifies non-academic users to which the project will be of interest. For example, two consecutive major projects on the Christian library from Turfan funded by the AHRC from 2008–11 (Hunter) and 2012–15 (Hunter and Sims-Williams) sought from the outset to work with the Turfanforschung in Berlin to catalogue and identify over 1050 manuscripts written in Syriac script that had been discovered at Turfan in north-west China. An impact plan designed at the start of the project envisaged benefits for museums and libraries, but also for modern Syriac-speaking communities in Iraq and Iran, as well as diaspora communities in Europe, North America and Australia. In addition, clergy participating at the 'Pro Oriente' discussions in Vienna (sponsored by The Vatican to foster an understanding of Christianity in the Middle East) have taken a direct interest in the Turfan Syriac manuscripts (dated 9th–14th centuries) since material embedded within these manuscripts imparts valuable information about the development of the liturgy in the early Christian era.

Structured engagement with external users took place within regular fora, such as advisory boards, including Sims-Williams's membership on the advisory committee planning a major international exhibition on the Sogdians, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington DC; Flügel acted as academic adviser to Jiva Daya Foundation, Dallas, USA. Some of this external work is facilitated by the SOAS Enterprise Office, which for example has established links with foreign affairs departments of European states to provide advice sessions for outgoing ambassadors. Within the Department, Hezser was contracted as part of this initiative to advise the outgoing Irish Ambassador to Israel in 2009.

Engagement with the public also takes advantage of serendipitous exchange with non-academic users in lectures and conferences involving faith communities, including Eastern and Orthodox Christian communities (annual Christianity in Iraq conferences inaugurated in 2004 and organised by Hunter), with Jains (annual Jaina Studies workshops and Annual Jaina Lecture organised by Flügel), Zoroastrians (conferences on Idea of Iran and annual Kutar Memorial lectures organised by Stewart and Hintze), and others. Two Departmental Research Centres annually publish newsletters both in print and online which have a worldwide impact on both academic and non-academic users. Where appropriate, we also seek to reach non-academic users through collaborations with other academic institutions. For example, one output of the AHRC-funded 'Locating culture, religion and the self' project – a series of 10 videos of Tantric Practitioners from Reb kong, Amdo, Tibet, were made available through the World Oral Literature project, a collaboration between Cambridge and Yale universities.

In addition, a number of significant activities and relationships have sought to inform perspectives and practice, including the provision of background information and interviews on the Tablighi Jama'at bomb plot in Canary Wharf and Heathrow Airport and other targets, an interview appearing as a feature for "Sunday", on air on 9 Sept 2008 (Hartung); expert witness work on behalf of asylum seekers from religious minorities groups, especially Mandaean (see section d. below); a campaign for Organ and Tissue Donation in the Jain community (Flügel in collaboration with NHS Blood and Transplant Senior Marketing & Campaigns Officers Dushyant Mehta, Jain Samaj Manchester, and Emma Avery); participation in a podium discussion on scholars of religion with prisoners and staff in HMP Wormwood Scrubs, organised by the Diversity Department of the prison (Flügel 2011).

**c. Strategy and plans**

Given the diverse nature of research in the Department, with work taking place over a wide range of time and of countries and religious traditions in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, our focus is on developing an impact strategy that creates the enabling conditions for engagement with non-academic users. First, our goal is to ensure a clear process for the development of impact plans for individual research projects, including relevant advice from within and outside the department on how this might best be achieved. The aim is to include this within internal peer review of research proposals prior to their submission to funding bodies. Second, we aim to develop a system to

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identify and track evidence of impact, both as a way of recording successes and in order to disseminate best practice. Although this work is primarily being undertaken at an institutional level within the School's Research and Enterprise Office (REO), the department is responsible for identifying project areas, specific pieces of work, events and opportunities and alerting the institution to them, as well as liaising with the REO as they evolve. The department will seek to develop this working relationship in the years to come.

A further dimension to our institutional strategy in relation to impact involves discussion of the incorporation of activity relating to impact into existing procedures for staff development, reward, promotion, probation and performance assessment. The formulation of plans for impact is now embedded within the great majority of external grants and the department and the School are keen to ensure that, where appropriate, achievable plans are incorporated into all research activity planning, whether internally or externally funded. Plans involve the specification of intended audiences, communication plans for the outputs of the research, funding for specific enhancement activity and a plan for evidence collection. One development that has already taken place is the creation of YouTube videos highlighting the research highlights of academic staff in the Department, aiming to bring this research to wider, and especially non-academic audiences. Our work is also highlighted in popular journals, newspapers and on-line blogs on Buddhism, Judaism.

**d. Relationship to case studies**

Two impact case studies have been provided as part of this submission, in line with HEFCE guidance, and both illustrate the significance of long-term, detailed theoretical and in-depth empirical scholarship in providing a sound basis for wider public impact. One of these cases demonstrates how a profound understanding of the history of religious practice and its present-day philosophical basis can have an important impact on perceptions of a religious minority amongst non-believers, particularly policy-makers and legal institutions; meanwhile, the other demonstrates how the academic study of religions can have a profound effect both within its own religious tradition and on interfaith understanding.

The first case study (Hunter), demonstrates the potentially far-reaching impact of individual scholarly endeavour. Hunter's work on religious minorities in the Middle East, in particular the Mandaeans, has influenced decision making with regard to members of that community seeking asylum in the UK. Hunter has written expert witness reports on current conditions of Christians and Mandaeans in Iraq, Iran and Egypt; their applications for asylum in the United Kingdom have been successful. This has had particular bearing for the Mandaeans, a small ethno-religious group (approximately 50,000), who traditionally resided in southern Mesopotamia. They are an ancient Mesopotamian community who, despite the misnomer of 'John the Baptist Christians', are Gnostic and are linked with the Essene environment of Judean Palestine at the time of Christ. Their religious texts are exclusively written in Mandaic, a dialect of Aramaic, but unlike Christians and Jews, the Mandaeans are not recognized by Islam as 'ahl-al-kitab' (peoples of the book) and hence have suffered terrible persecution. Since 2003, some 90% of the Mandaean population has either been killed or fled from Iraq. In Iran, discrimination is also rife: Mandaeans are 'infidels', with no constitutional and few legal rights. Hunter's fieldwork in Iraq (1989–2002), where she had extensive contact with the Mandaeans, together with her on-going communication with the largely diaspora community has enabled her to draw attention to and inform the Home Office about the current conditions. In recognition of her expertise and contribution, the Mandaean community invited Hunter in 2012 to be President of Mandaean Crisis International, a group that lobbies internationally on behalf of the Mandaeans, with particular emphasis on human rights.

The second case study (Flugel) demonstrates the impact of research within a Centre of Jaina Studies upon a number of external constituencies as well as upon students and academics. Key constituency are the Jain communities not only in the UK and Europe but also in the US where Centre events are circulated on video, and Jain thought and practice – on architecture, on yoga, on biodiversity – are promulgated and spread. The Centre and its publications act as a focal point for maintaining and developing the network of connections within a highly dispersed set of communities across the globe.