

Institution: University of Chester

Unit of Assessment: 33: Theology and Religious Studies

a. Overview

Since 2008, the Department of Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) at Chester has experienced significant growth in research activity and reputation. The arrival of internationally-recognised scholars alongside a number of strategic Early Career Researcher appointments has served to boost Chester's profile and laid the foundations for continuing and sustained achievement. The department's greater prominence is evident in the breadth and scope of its internationally-recognised research activity, in the doubling of staff submitted to REF2014 from RAE2008 and the remarkable growth of its PGR community.

Since 2008, TRS has benefitted from University investment in research facilities and infrastructure, both centrally-based and at Faculty and departmental level. It is located within the Faculty of Humanities which comprises Modern Languages, History and Archaeology and English Literature and Linguistics, all of which are similarly research-intensive. This is enabling the interchange of expertise, ideas and initiatives, such as provision of early career researcher training, interdisciplinary projects and collaborative research bids.

TRS's specialist expertise has also diversified and now includes internationally-excellent researchers in practical and public theology, systematic theology and theological ethics, biblical studies and a wide range of disciplines in religious studies. The coherence of the Department's research profile rests in a shared commitment to scholarly study of the foundations, sources and practices of major faith traditions, embracing historical, textual, anthropological and empirical methodologies, as well as an ambition to extend the reach of our research into areas of public engagement, pedagogical innovation and cross-disciplinary collaboration.

The department occupies its own building, Hollybank, which underwent extensive renovation and upgrading to the value of more than £¼ million in summer 2010. This houses the department's offices for administrative and academic staff, teaching rooms as well as a dedicated workroom for all students, including PCs and printers, plus social space.

The University of Chester distributes QR funding to the departments generating it. This means that TRS has been able to invest funds generated from the 2008 RAE in expanding staffing, making the potential to contribute to REF an essential criterion for all new academic appointments. Workloads are managed to facilitate staff time for research, with 550/1650 workload hours allocated to research for full-time colleagues, pro-rata for part-time.

TRS at Chester places a premium on building an active, inclusive research community that extends from all research-active staff (100% of academic staff now have PhDs) to its growing and diverse PGR body, and incorporating MA and UG students who are able to benefit from our research-centred teaching. Since many of our PGRs (especially those on the Doctor of Professional Studies programme, now numbering over 50) are researching practitioners, our research environment is also designed to maximize interaction between the academy and wider communities of practice.

b. Research strategy

Since 2008, two permanent staff have moved to chairs at other institutions: **Celia Deane-Drummond** to the University of Notre Dame, IN and **Tom Greggs** to the University of Aberdeen. **Davide Torri**, part-time lecturer in Religious Studies, left to take up a post-doctoral research fellowship at the University of Heidelberg. In 2009, the Department recruited **Elaine Graham** and **Chris Baker** from Manchester and **Rob Warner**, **Wendy Dossett** and **Paul Middleton** from Lampeter. **Mat Collins**, **Ben Fulford**, **William Kay**, **Dawn Llewellyn**, **Jon Morgan**, **Suzanne Owen**, **David Shepherd** and **Alana Vincent** have subsequently been appointed from other institutions. Some of these new posts have been made possible through an expansion of collaborative partnership provision and the Department has worked to build research capacity with these partners through offering joint research seminars in biblical studies and theology.

The Department's objectives after RAE 2008 were to increase the quality and volume of research outputs, to encourage more ambitious individual and collaborative projects, to expand PGR student numbers and to build a more coherent and sustainable research culture. These aspirations have largely been met through the careful management of staff recruitment, strategic

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investment of QR and other funding into staffing and infrastructure, and the strengthening of departmental and central procedures for staff development, student recruitment and quality enhancement.

Staff research capacity has been enhanced through promotion of regular research days, a system of regular sabbaticals and provision of staff development funding and faculty research grants to present at international conferences. All staff attend six-monthly meetings with the Head of Department and the Research Co-ordinator to ensure research targets are maintained. In 2012, four sub-departmental research clusters were established:

- Biblical Studies, Second Temple Judaism and Early Christian History (**Collins, Evans, Middleton, Morgan, Shepherd**)
- Contextual, Practical and Public Theologies (**Bacon, Baker, Graham, Morris**)
- Religious Studies, Contemporary Spiritualities and Religion & Society (**Dossett, Ferrari, Kay, Knowles, Llewellyn, Owen, Vincent, Warner**)
- Systematic Theology and Theological Ethics (**Clough, Fulford**)

These clusters represent points of external coherence (in terms of publicity, PGR marketing and recruitment) and internal focus (for developing collaborative projects and funding bids, and enabling equitable allocation of sabbatical leave, since no single individual is required to carry a sub-disciplinary area on their own). They also enable PGR students to benefit from supervision panels that reflect a critical mass of staff expertise. Termly meetings of each grouping to discuss future projects, encourage individual and collaborative research publications and maximise external grant applications is complemented by departmental interventions, such as the development of a central database of research funding opportunities, updated regularly by the Research Co-ordinator; internal peer review of all research funding applications; and the inclusion of research business as a standing item at departmental meetings and away days. In 2011 the Department expanded its administrative team to include a dedicated Postgraduate and Research administrator who is responsible for the management of PG admissions, annual progress reviews, departmental research seminars and residentials and support for conference organization.

The Department has also sought to raise its national and international research profile by hosting a number of prestigious academic conferences, such as the Global Network for Public Theology, British Sociological Association Study of Religion Network, the British and Irish Association for Practical Theology and the British New Testament Society. It is also gaining a reputation as a hub for themed colloquia that draw international researchers and postgraduates for periods of innovative, interdisciplinary interchange. These also serve as a pump-primer for longer-standing, cross-institutional, collaborations. This process began with a 24-hour departmental event at Gladstone's Library in October 2009, resulting in the edited volume *Transforming Exclusion* (eds. **Bacon, Knowles** and **Morris**, Continuum, 2010). Since then, it has been extended into a regular series of open events with Calls for Papers and publication of proceedings. Events so far have been: 'Speculative Philosophies and Religious Practices' (June 2011, jointly with Philosophy, University of Liverpool and TRS, Liverpool Hope University: **Baker**) resulting in a special edition of *Political Theology* (13.2, 2012) and a successful research network bid to the AHRC (see section e); 'Alternative Salvations' (October 2012: **Bacon, Dossett, Knowles**), edited volume forthcoming with Bloomsbury; 'Risk and Rapture: Apocalyptic Imagination in Late Modernity' (September 2013: **Knowles**), with guaranteed publication in *Theory, Culture & Society*. These colloquia will continue as annual events beyond 2014.

An ambitious research strategy has been formulated to maintain the Department's productivity and vision over the next five years. Overall, the Department's research strategy for 2014-20 is designed to retain existing staff, maintain its reputation as a highly collegial staff and student environment and continue the trajectory of a growing internationally significant research profile. From 2014 TRS seeks to:

- Foster staff research capacity and ambition (support for funding applications; maintaining a sabbatical leave rota; regular workshops with invited expert speakers; making use of Faculty networks);
- Continue to support early career researchers by targeting funding for new research projects and implementing departmental and Faculty mentoring schemes;
- Expand existing links between departmental research and public engagement activities by targeting resources towards 'pathways to impact' initiatives;
- Increase routes to postgraduate research, especially amongst our own graduate community

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and internationally;

- Work with researchers in the Faculty of Humanities to develop interdisciplinary research projects (e.g. the establishment of a new Research Centre for Gender Studies in 2013-14).
- Develop collaborative research opportunities with other HEIs (e.g. **Owen's** research on First Nations in Newfoundland; bilateral or cross-institutional links within the Global Network for Public Theology);
- Strengthen links with Gladstone's library, as a venue for departmental research events, as a resource for PGRs and for collaborative research opportunities. For example, discussions are underway to develop a project on twentieth-century liberal and radical theologies, focusing on the Library's recent acquisitions of the archives of John A.T. Robinson and Don Cupitt (**Clough, Graham, Fulford**).

Departmental meetings and away days will continue to monitor these objectives as well as addressing key national and international developments in the management of research and government policy, such as open access journal publishing and trends in research council funding.

c. People, including:

i. Staffing strategy and staff development

The Department and the University are strongly committed to the development of all academic staff, post-doctoral students and research fellows. This was recognised externally by the recent award to the University of the HR Excellence in Research Award which demonstrates a commitment to implementation of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. In 2012 the Faculty of Humanities identified some 18 early in career researchers across four departments (in TRS, **Collins, Fulford, Knowles, Llewellyn, Morgan, Vincent**) and set up an informal network (facilitated by **Graham**), which meets once a term to encourage staff development, promote networking across departmental and disciplinary boundaries and assist with proposals for external research funding by strengthening links with staff in the Research and Knowledge Transfer Office.

All new academic staff at the University are supported through an accredited programme leading to a Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy. A particular feature of the Chester programme is that the compulsory core modules include elements designed to help and support newly-appointed staff to understand the requirements and opportunities of research supervision. A further, optional module develops skills in supervision to an even higher level. The probationary and induction programmes are interlinked and ensure that all new members of staff are introduced to a wide range of facilities and policies. These include access to the Research and Knowledge Transfer Office, which is available to provide assistance in applying for grants and setting up R&D contracts, and to colleagues in the Graduate School who can help to advertise research projects and to interview and admit potential research students. At departmental level, newly-appointed staff are given a mentor charged with helping them establish long-term research goals, supported by twice-yearly meetings with the Head of Department and Research Co-ordinator.

Subsequently, all PGR supervisors have to demonstrate how they are pursuing staff development activities, including those organized by the University, to maintain and enhance supervision skills. The Doctor of Professional Studies (DProf) programme team (**Baker, Graham, Knowles, Llewellyn** and **Morris**) holds regular meetings for curriculum development and supervision skills training as well as participating in biannual national staff development days of the national consortium of professional doctorates in practical theology.

The University of Chester supports activities promoting equality and diversity. There is a long-established annual University Diversity Festival to which all staff and students are invited. The University has a Disabled Staff Group that has been active since 2007 and provides a safe and supportive environment in which to discuss issues relating to disability. The Human Resources Department monitors regularly for equality issues as part of the recruitment process for staff and funded research students, and the University is currently working towards an Athena Swan award.

The University's Annual Staff Conference is an all-day event held each year. Research is featured within the conference through several parallel sessions which showcase successful projects, share opportunities to develop impact or offer advice on grant applications, collaborative initiatives and best practice in good research governance and project management.

All staff are expected to work towards research outputs of international significance as appropriate and in negotiation with the Head of Department and Staff Development Interviews.

Academic staff receive an annual professional development grant of £750 in 2013-14 for attending conferences, which can be supplemented by additional Faculty funding on a competitive basis. The department maintains a rota of sabbatical research leave to enable staff to pursue research. Each research active member of staff is entitled to four months' research leave once every four years, although this does not preclude staff from applying for external competitive research funding at other times. In addition to this, staff are given a statutory provision of weeks for research and scholarly activity by the University, and encouraged to keep regular research days. Within TRS, staff are actively encouraged to participate in international conferences, and since 2008 the department has had a strong collective presence at the annual American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature meetings (see also Section e).

ii. Research students

Training and support for PGR students is a shared responsibility between the Graduate School, which provides generic training and support, and the department, which offers supervision and specialist training and support. PGR students are offered face-to-face training sessions by the Graduate School, supported by a Moodle site providing on-line access to training materials written and contributed by academic staff from across all subjects and faculties.

Students participate in a central induction to the University plus a local departmental day-long orientation, which offers a full overview of the services and procedures operated by central support departments as well as an introduction to departmental support staff, subject-specific events and facilities.

Thereafter, all PGR students are encouraged to attend the weekly departmental research seminars which combine research papers from visiting speakers and opportunities for students to present work in progress with sessions on topics such as *Thesis Writing*, *Surviving the Viva*, *Doing Qualitative Research* and *Getting Published*. Chester-based students are required to attend, although sessions are recorded as podcasts of proceedings by the University's professional media team and uploaded onto TRS's publicly-accessible website (<http://www.chester.ac.uk/trs/research/seminars>). These serve as a useful resource for part-time and distance-based candidates, an archive for new generations of students and an effective 'shop window' for potential applicants.

All PGR students are required to undertake a self-assessment skills audit, using the Researcher Development Framework, to help them to identify their training needs. If necessary they are referred elsewhere within the University, such as to the Graduate School or Student Support and Guidance, for further training and support. Students diagnosed with special educational needs are referred to a Disability Support Worker. International students have access to specialist language training, including introductions to academic writing in English. The University's Royal Literary Fellow, Mike Harris, provides one-to-one support in academic writing skills for any UG or PG student, and has led workshops at TRS and Faculty training events for PGRs.

Students who will be involved in teaching whilst at the University are expected to undertake specific training to prepare them for this activity, and may, if they wish, undertake modules leading to Associate Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy. Like all members of teaching staff, they are subject to periodic peer review of teaching as a standard aspect of professional development. Every student is supported by a team of at least two approved supervisors, one of whom is designated Director of Studies, and who will have supervised at least one student to successful completion of the award. Supervision meetings take place frequently, with at least one recommended contact per month being recorded with outcomes and targets. MPhil and PhD candidates embark initially on a probationary period of study, normally 6-9 months full-time, after which students must submit a report, give a seminar and attend an interview before their upgrade to PhD can be confirmed. If a student's registration is confirmed at the probationary review, an Annual Progress Review (chaired by an independent academic staff member) continues to monitor a student's performance against objectives and expectations.

DProf candidates undertake a similar pattern of induction, research skills training and regular supervision. In addition, they attend two 24-hour and one 48-hour residential seminars, covering generic research topics as well as specialist, subject-specific themes. All students are expected to present work in progress for peer review at least once a year, and other informal support takes place through action-learning sets at residenceals and online. Summative assessment

at stage 1 (pre-thesis portfolio) takes place annually and feeds into the annual progress review, which proceeds in the same fashion as those for MPhil/PhD. Thereafter, at stage 2, DProf students' progress resembles that of a conventional doctoral student, although the attendance requirement at residential continues. Whilst not classed as 'taught' modules, all elements of the DProf research portfolio have a dedicated online Moodle space, thereby facilitating distance access to specialist materials. Additional added value to the DProf student experience is provided through a collaborative annual 48-hour Summer School, organized jointly by Chester and three other centres of excellence for professional doctoral provision in Practical Theology, which normally involves a series of masterclasses led by a leading international scholar in the field.

All PGR students must undertake a 'mock viva' within the Department prior to submission and are given a full debrief on their performance.

Beyond the department, the Faculty of Humanities has a dedicated PG tutor (**Llewellyn**) who is available to see PGR students by appointment and to resolve any issues or questions they may have. The Graduate School convenes a regular meeting of all Faculty tutors across the University. The growth in PGR numbers has meant that a single, centralized annual postgraduate conference previously organized by the Graduate School was in 2011 devolved to Faculties. In Humanities, it now takes the form of an external speaker on some aspect of research methodology or scholarship, together with work in progress presentations by students.

The department actively promotes participation in external academic conferences for all its PGR students within the UK and internationally. Each year applications are invited and all successful candidates are provided with financial support. The University has also established a fund to provide a contribution to conference attendance. All PGRs are encouraged to disseminate research in other ways, such as pursuing publishing and reviewing opportunities; the DProf portfolio requires students to produce a 'publishable article', many of which have subsequently been successfully submitted to a range of peer-reviewed journals such as *Dementia*, *Journal of Adult Theological Education*, *Practical Theology*, *Theology* and the *Journal of Anglican Studies*.

d. Income, infrastructure and facilities

The University Library has over 260,000 printed volumes in its collections. The collections also include 15,000 e-books which are core academic texts plus access to many other online materials. The library also subscribes to over 1,000 printed journals and more than 13,000 electronic journals which can be accessed online. The recent adoption of the ProQuest search engine and Dawsonera eLibrary offers comprehensive access to library and electronic sources, on- and off-campus. Books can be borrowed from any of the libraries at the University's different sites.

All full-time and part-time academic staff are provided with office space with desks, telephones and computers and, on request the Department provides a laptop or iPad for off-campus use. Photocopying facilities, stationery and Inter-Library Loan vouchers are also freely available to all staff.

All PGR students can borrow a laptop computer for the duration of their studies. In addition to PC workstations in Hollybank, students have access to a dedicated central University secure PG study space, newly-refurbished in 2012-13. Wireless internet is available throughout the campus. Off-campus, PGR students have access to Graduate School Moodle sites and online resources. At the main campus library there is 24/7 access to computers, printing and quiet study space throughout the year. Students based outside Chester can make use of the Distance Learner Service scheme, whereby books are loaned and returned by post. A large proportion of distance-based PGRs in TRS also avail themselves of the SCONUL system, which enables them to access other major university libraries across the UK. PGRs receive 60% subsidies for Inter-Library Loans.

Gladstone's Library in Hawarden is an associate research library for the Faculty. As well as its substantial collections in literature and political history, the Library contains major holdings in Theology from the time of W.E. Gladstone to the present day, including the recent acquisition of the archives of John A.T. Robinson. It has also newly opened an Islamic Studies collection and Reading Room, alongside its Islam, Faith and Culture Project. The Library is a regular venue for research-related activities for TRS, including DProf residentials, book launches and short colloquia.

e. Collaboration or contribution to the discipline or research base

Strategic appointments since 2008 have enabled TRS not only to maintain staffing levels, but to recruit new staff capable of consolidating and extending its international research profile. Since 2008 there has been a significant step-change in research productivity both in terms of proportion of research active staff and in the volume of output. All staff have published research in the forms of book chapters, journal articles and online publications; most have at least one monograph. All staff regularly present papers at symposia and research seminars, including internationally; and many have been invited as keynote speakers to prestigious international conferences.

The following details indicate some of the Department's activities and achievements since RAE 2008:

Visiting scholars at the University of Chester

Aaron Gross (University of San Diego, CA): Leverhulme Trust Visiting Fellowship 2011-12.

Irene Ayallo (Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand): Gladstone Post-Doctoral Visiting Fellow in Contextual Theology, 2012.

External Research Funding

Baker: £27,000 for *Philosophy and Religious Practices*, AHRC Research Network (jointly with Departments of Philosophy, University of Liverpool and Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies, Liverpool Hope University), 2012-14.

Graham: £14,200 for *Faith, Secularism and Public Life*, Economic and Social Science Research Council Seminar Series, 2009-10.

Dossett: £25,800 from Sir Halley Stewart Trust for the *Higher Power Project*, a TRS-based research project in addiction, recovery and spirituality, for investigation into the phenomenology of addicts and alcoholics in recovery, 2012-14.

Warner: £334,000 for *Christianity and the University Experience in England* from AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society project (jointly with universities of Durham and Derby), 2009-2012.

External examination of doctorates

Baker: Anglia Ruskin, Birmingham, Exeter and Staffordshire.

Clough: Aberdeen, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Exeter, Leeds, Oxford, Wales, Winchester; University of Newcastle, Australia.

Graham: Birmingham, Exeter, Liverpool Hope, Wales and Winchester; School of Philosophy, Murdoch University, Australia; International Baptist Institute, Prague; University of Ottawa, ON.

Kay: Birmingham, Cardiff, Huddersfield, KCL, Middlesex, Nottingham, Wales, Warwick; Oslo.

Middleton: Bangor, Edinburgh, Manchester.

Scholarly awards and prizes

Ferrari: Visiting Professorship, Dipartimento di Scienze Storiche, Geografiche e dell'Antichità, Università degli Studi di Padova, Italy, 2013; Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 2012; 'Colleagues' Choice Award', 8th International Conference of Asia Scholars, Macau for Guilty Males and Proud Females: Negotiating Genders in a Bengali Festival (2010).

Kay: Honorary Doctor of Divinity, University of Nottingham, 2009.

International conference presentations, lectures & keynote addresses

Baker: National Church Life Survey/Australian Catholic University, Sydney; Charles Sturt University, Sydney; National University of Singapore; European Union Institute, Italy; University of Groningen; Association of American Geographers, New York; Spiritual Capital Ireland Centre, Dublin City University.

Clough: Fordham University, NY; University of Utrecht, Netherlands; American Academy of Religion; International Symposium, Christian Ethics Engages Peter Singer, University of Oxford.

Collins: European Association of Biblical Studies, Leipzig; International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Amsterdam.

Ferrari: Ca' Foscari University of Venice; University Roma Tre; University of Padova; Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India; Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India; Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim; Donner Institute, Turku, Finland; Centre for the Humanities and Medicine, University of Hong Kong.

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Graham: Center for Study of Religion and Conflict, Arizona State University; Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Germany; University of Toronto, Canada; Diakonhjemmet University College, Oslo; School of Religion, Theology and Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin; University of Bamberg; AHRC Religion & Society Research Network, St. Catherine's College, Oxford; Catholic University, Louvain; International Academy of Practical Theology, Berlin; American Academy of Religion.

Kay: Chinese University, Hong Kong; Hollenweger Lecture, University of Birmingham.

Knowles: Center for Religion and Media, New York University, NY.

Llewellyn: American Academy of Religion, San Francisco, Chicago.

Middleton: American Academy of Religion; Society of Biblical Literature.

Owen: American Academy of Religion; International Association for the History of Religions (Tokyo, Toronto), European Association for the Study of Religions (Budapest, Stockholm, Liverpool), Native American Studies Network Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (Athens, GA, USA); Abo Akademi (Turku, Finland).

Shepherd: University of Lausanne; IMSBL, Amsterdam; SBL, San Francisco.

Vincent: Visiting Scholar, Uppsala University; International Society for the Study of Narrative, Cleveland, Ohio; International Society of Religion, Literature and Culture, Aarhus; European Institute for Jewish Studies, Stockholm; American Academy of Religion; Philosophy of Religion, Monument and Memory, Stockholm; University of Copenhagen; Lund University.

Warner: University of Seoul, South Korea.

Leading positions in learned societies

Baker: Co-chair, Post-secular Urban Theory group, Annual Conference of American Geographers.

Clough: Chair, Theological Ethics Seminar, Society for the Study of Theology; Secretary, TRS UK (formerly AUDTRS); Secretary, Society for the Study of Christian Ethics.

Graham: Executive Chair, Global Network for Public Theology, 2011-14.

Knowles: Chair, UK Religion and Popular Culture Research Network.

Middleton: Secretary, British New Testament Society.

Owen: Co-chair, Indigenous Religious Traditions Group, American Academy of Religion; Committee Member, British Association for the Study of Religions.

Vincent: Steering Committee, Holocaust & Genocide Group, AAR; Committee member, International Society for Religion, Literature & Culture.

Organization/hosting of meetings of learned societies in Chester

Clough: *European Forum for the Study of Religion and Environment*, May 2011;

Collins: *Bible, Critical Theory and Reception Seminar*, September 2013;

Graham: *Global Network for Public Theology*, September 2013;

Knowles: *UK Religion and Popular Culture Research Network*, April 2011;

Llewellyn: *British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group*, March 2012.

Editorships of Journals and Academic Imprints

Baker editor (with Rana Jawad, University of Kent), 'Social Policy and Religion in Contemporary Britain', *Social Policy and Society* Special Edition Vol. 11, no. 4, 2012.

Graham: Co-editor, *International Journal of Practical Theology* (de Gruyter);

Kay: Series Editor, *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies*, Brill publishers;

Owen: Editor, *DISKUS* (Journal of BASR).

Editorial Board Memberships

Clough: *Studies in Christian Ethics*

Ferrari: *South Asia Research*; *Storia delle Religioni*; *Civiltà e Religioni*.

Graham: *International Journal of Public Theology*; *Practical Theology*;

Kay: *Journal of Beliefs and Values*; *British Journal of Religious Education*.

Peer Reviewer for Funding Councils and Award-Making Bodies

Clough, Graham, Warner: AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme.

Graham: Art and Humanities Research Council Peer Review Panel; ESRC.

Kay: John Templeton Foundation.