



**PROVOST'S REPORT TO COUNCIL ON  
THE REVIEW OF THE SCHOOL OF  
HEBREW, BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES**

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

This report presents the outcome of a departmental review exercise undertaken by Trinity College Dublin in relation to its School of Hebrew, Biblical and Theological Studies. An external peer reviewer visitation was conducted on the 7th and 8th March 2002 by Rt. Rev. Professor S. Sykes, University of Durham, and Professor P.F. Esler, University of St. Andrews. During the site visit the reviewers met with all staff of the School, staff of cognate departments, representatives of undergraduate and postgraduate students in the School, and senior officers of the College.

This report is based on (i) a report from the external reviewers received on 28th June 2002, (ii) a submission from the Faculty Dean received on 24th September 2002, and (iii) a submission from the School, received on 12th September 2002.

The main purpose of the departmental review exercise is (a) to provide a structured opportunity for the Department to reflect on its activities and plans for development, while benefiting from a constructive commentary by senior colleagues external to College, and (b) to ensure that quality and standards in teaching, research and administration are being maintained and enhanced, and that any areas of concern in this regard are identified and addressed within an eighteen month timescale, having regard to the resources available. This review process ensures that each academic Department in College will have its undergraduate and postgraduate provision reviewed systematically once every five years.

**2. OVERVIEW OF THE SCHOOL**

**2.1 Aims and Objectives of the School**

1. To promote and encourage the research interests of individual members of staff and, to seek, in co-operative research frameworks, new possibilities for fruitful research in the interface between disciplines.
2. To provide a wide and balanced range of courses on the Jewish and Christian traditions appropriate to an honors degree in the humanities, and which aim to develop students' linguistic, historical, literary, philosophical and theological skills and critical awareness in an environment of open yet engaged study of particular religions.
3. Through its public lecture series and conferences, to promote a constructive approach to dealing with life issues that are of increasing fundamental concern to people at a time when the existing institutional props to religious belief and secular society are weakened by social development and by philosophical, political, and social critique.

**2.2 Programmes to which the School provides teaching:**

Key programmes:

Single Honor Moderatorship in Biblical and Theological Studies

Two-Subject Moderatorship programme in Biblical and Theological Studies

Two-Subject Moderatorship programme in Jewish Studies

In association with the Church of Ireland Theological College, the School contributes teaching to the professional course in Theology leading to an award at one of three levels, diploma, ordinary degree or honors degree.

In addition the School provides regular evening lecture courses for the general public.

### 2.3 Research

The staff of the School, both full-time and part-time, are actively engaged in research across a wide range of disciplines (biblical studies, Jewish studies, theological studies with all their sub-disciplines). Through their individual publications and other contributions to research, such as the editorship of scholarly works and membership of learned societies, the School enjoys a high profile, both nationally and internationally. The School's participation in co-operative research includes the Mediterranean and Near Eastern Studies programme, funded under the HEA Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions, involving close collaboration with the School of Classics. Project funding has allowed for the appointment of research fellows and for an extensive programme of research seminars, publications and conferences.

### 2.4 Summary Statistical Profile of the School for the Academic Year 2000-2001.

Full-time staff FTE	Part-time staff FTE	Undergraduate FTE	Postgraduate (research) FTE	Department Staff:Student Ratio	Faculty Staff:Student Ratio
6	1.19	103	14	16	24

<sup>1</sup> Figures approved by Council at its meeting on 9th January 2002

The full-time staff of six includes three Professors, one Associate Professor and two Lecturers.

### 2.5 Accommodation and facilities (Physical Resources)

The School is located in the Arts Building. Staff offices are, in the main, on Level 5, although some offices are located on other floors. Part-time staff share offices and the School has no dedicated teaching or meeting room. The Weingreen Museum is also located on Level 5 though not immediately adjacent to the departmental offices. The Museum houses a unique collection of artefacts from the Ancient Near East constituting an important resource for teaching and research. The Museum space is also used for small group seminars.

## 3. EXTERNAL PEER REVIEW REPORT

### SUMMARY OF REPORT

#### TEACHING

The reviewers recorded their *"extremely positive view of the range and calibre of the teaching offered by the staff and the results they achieve, especially in view of the low entry marks of many students in the School."* They comment favourably on the four-year Moderatorship which *"allows greater depth in learning, manifested especially in the provision for students to elect to undertake a 10,000 word dissertation in their senior sophister year"*. From their detailed consideration of the undergraduate curriculum, the reviewers found the quality of the courses offered to be *"very high"* and the range of courses offered to be *"impressive"*. They observed that *"Students are clearly exposed to lively teaching, characterised by both breadth and depth, which engages with the most recent developments and insights in each area. Much of the material taught draws upon the high quality research being conducted by the colleagues concerned."* The fact that attendance is compulsory at all lectures, seminars and tutorials was seen as being *"an*

*attractive feature of the provision".*

The reviewers noted that *"The School documentation at present lacks a written statement of the characteristics and quality of work required for the attainment of various levels of achievement listed in ...the School's Academic Handbook "* and identified a degree of variability both in the feedback to students on written work and in the presentation and provision to students of course materials. The use by staff of School templates for course handouts and assessments was recommended.

The number of subject combinations involving Biblical Studies within the Two Subject Moderatorship was seen as producing undue rigidity in the timetable, making it difficult for the School to schedule tutorials for students in the second year - *"this caused some concern to students to whom we spoke"*. The reviewers pointed to the advantages of the semester course model in terms both of attracting one-semester abroad students from the USA and of enhanced flexibility of provision at undergraduate level. In this context, the reviewers suggested that consideration be given by the College to *"moving to a fully semesterised and modular system"* within which students could take one module each year *"of the generic type now being developed pursuant to the 'Policy on the Broad Curriculum' or simply selected from any department, prerequisites permitting"*.

The reviewers state that student appraisal forms revealed *"very high levels of satisfaction with the content and delivery of the courses"*, and encouraged the Department to adopt a more systematic approach to the analysis of feedback from students.

With regard to the recent development of undergraduate courses in Jewish Studies, the reviewers commented that these *"offer students learning opportunities of a kind and quality unique in Ireland and unusual in the UK."* Noting the School's stated interest in development in the area of philosophical and systematic theology and in Islamic Studies, together with its commitment to consolidate the staff resources in Jewish Studies, the reviewers express the view *"that these proposals require greater clarity about the nature and rationale of the experience being offered to students at undergraduate level"*. Under the heading *"Matters for Reflection: Identity"*, they invite the School to consider a number of questions of both a practical and theoretical nature concerning the identity and future direction of the School. The assessors *"implicitly invite further review of the long and ungainly name by which the School is known. It was represented to us that the appearance of 'theology' in the title is both suspect in itself and a disincentive to potential candidates. Has the School any evidence from schools to confirm or disconfirm this view? In this respect the relationship between the School (and College) and the Irish School of Ecumenics is plainly of great future importance. We believe that all parties would be well served by developing collaboration."*

The assessors commend the staff for maintaining *"a high profile for the School in Ireland by its high quality series of evening lectures"*, considered to be *"a conspicuous and distinguished feature of the life of the School"* and one which provides an important point of contact with the wider public. The assessors point to the *"formidable resources of goodwill"* towards the School built up over the years amongst those who have attended the lecture series.

## **RESEARCH**

The reviewers prefaced their report with the view that *"in the last twenty years the School has confronted with conspicuous success the challenge of refocusing the study of its disciplines in such a way as both to serve a variety of publics in a radically changing national context, and to develop an international scholarly reputation. In this period it has plainly enjoyed distinguished academic and personal leadership."* The School's academic staff were considered to be *"an exciting cohort of researchers and teachers which punches considerably over its weight"*. The reviewers state that *"[i]t is evident that research of high quality is being carried out by all members of staff, a substantial proportion of it of international importance"*, adding that *"[t]his is all the more commendable since the basic resources for this work are not invariably within easy reach"*. They further assert that the quality of the research conducted in the School *"should be set in a context of comparative underfunding of research in Ireland (compared with the UK)"*. In this regard, the establishment of the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences is seen as *"a very encouraging development"*. With regard to recent developments within the School, the establishment of the Chaim Herzog Centre for Jewish and Near Eastern Religion and Culture *"has produced a valuable broadening of the interests and expertise of the School"*. The School's involvement in the Mediterranean and Near Eastern Studies programme, funded by the HEA under its Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions, is seen as giving *"the School's biblical scholars a chance to compare their ideas*

*and methodologies with those working in the area of ancient history, as well as providing the School with quite a different perspective on the ancient world and the place of Jews and Christians within it. The School benefits greatly from collaboration with colleagues in the Departments of Classics and Philosophy."*

The reviewers suggest that *"the research culture of the School, which is already high, would be enhanced if it could devise and adopt, with the support of the College, a clear policy of explicit encouragement to staff to take sabbatical leave for research purposes."*

Noting the recent decline in numbers of research students, the reviewers strongly encourage the School to consider *"the introduction of a taught graduate course to achieve the transition from the basis skills and knowledge of the first degree to independent research."*

### **RESOURCES**

The reviewers noted *"In the past four decades, curricula of Christian theology in many European and North American contexts have been challenged and diversified by developments in religious studies. The obvious difficulty which has been encountered is the stretching of the resources of comparatively small departments too thinly across too many disparate subject areas."* While recognising that the School is engaged in internal discussion about the coherence of its teaching programme, the reviewers encourage the School to continue *"to convey a confident message about the nature and value of its core programme, whilst recognising the limits of funding"*. They go on to recommend that *"The School should find a way of assessing the risks to its future viability, performance and reputation, bearing particularly in mind its heavy dependence upon part-time teaching, including that of retired people."*

In terms of accommodation, the reviewers recommend that School accommodation should be consolidated within the same area of the Arts Building. With regard to the Weingreen Museum, the reviewers noted that *"its collection is not all on display or available for use..."*. They recommend that *"the College should seriously consider moving the Weingreen Museum to a different venue on the campus ... so that its profile can be raised and its collections properly displayed and utilised"*. With regard to teaching rooms, the reviewers note that *"some teaching rooms were the subject of regular complaints by students for being poorly ventilated and poorly lit, with non-ergonomic furniture"*, and recommend that the College review its use of funds to ensure that general purpose teaching rooms are not overlooked in favour of specialist facilities.

### **ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT**

The School was considered to operate *"on an efficient and collegial basis"*. In noting the *"numerous and conflicting demands"* upon the Head of Department and the *"very considerable"* workload of the School's Executive Officer, the reviewers recommend *"that there should be a review, with external participation, of the administrative support required for the present and foreseeable future needs of the School, so as to avoid further demands upon the head of department or on junior and part-time staff, or the departmental secretary"*. The College's tutorial system was deemed to be *"of great importance"*, although it was suggested that *"it would be more obviously valued by the College if .... participating tutors were made to feel that time spent on tutorial work was not at the expense of their own or their department's professional reputation."*

The reviewers commend the *"strong collegial spirit among members of the School"* and note that *"senior members of staff have taken a keen interest in furthering the careers of younger members, especially in relation to publishing"*. Perceiving there to be *"only limited take-up of the College's staff development programme by members of the School"*, the reviewers expressed the view that *"opportunities for taking staff development courses should be provided and attendance at a reasonable number per annum mandated."* With regard to part-time staff, the reviewers draw attention to difficulties evident in issuing contracts of employment before the commencement of the academic year and make a number of recommendations in relation to institutional support and career development for part-time members of the academic staff.

### **RECRUITMENT OF STUDENTS**

The low entry points for admission to the undergraduate programmes had been cited by the School in its self-assessment documentation as a key problem. In their consideration of this issue, the reviewers suggest that *"The introduction of Religious Studies as a recognised senior secondary subject in Irish schools needs actively to be seized upon by the School as an opportunity to market its services"*, and *"the School should*

ensure that its courses are adequately represented in the H.Dip.Ed. programme for secondary teachers run by TCD and should consider being represented in the modular 'in-service' courses organised on a country-wide basis by the College's Department of Education". The School is also encouraged to explore ways of improving its communication with secondary schools. Pursuant to their recommendations with regard to introducing a "semesterised and fully modular system", the reviewers suggest that the School liaise more closely with the Office of International Student Affairs and with the Careers Advisory Service to refine recruitment and marketing strategies. As noted under 'Research' above, the reviewers encourage the introduction of a taught course at graduate level in the context of advocating a strategic response on the part of the School to the decline in research student numbers.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The reviewers' recommendations are summarised as follows:

### **Identity**

1. *The School needs to continue its current discussion about the coherence of its curriculum and likely developments.*
2. *The outcome of this discussion should be represented in all its communications with potential future students.*

### **Teaching**

3. *Although there may be timetabling problems to be overcome, we consider ... that second year tutorials should be arranged... .*
4. *In relation to handouts for each course, there should preferably be consistency across the School. School templates should be developed to cover the different types of materials offered, with the resulting documents to be supplied to students at the same point in the various courses. These templates should outline learning outcomes to be achieved, relating both to subject-specific and generic skills, and assessment could then be directed to the achievement of these outcomes.*
5. *School-wide templates should be developed for assessing written work which offer students comments under various headings which match those of the desired outputs announced in the course handout.*
6. *The School should prepare a written statement of the characteristics and quality of work required for the attainment of various levels of achievement listed in the School's Academic Handbook. The College should ensure that the same statement and scale applies across all departments and schools, especially since the existence of joint degrees would render inconsistent approaches to marking by the colleagues responsible for the different parts of a degree unjust to the students concerned.*
7. *Each class should elect a student representative to attend meetings with the staff. That student should be given a chance in a class prior to any such meetings to discuss issues of concern with the students. A form should be provided to such representative to allow points to be listed and the number of students concerned with any issue, to ensure that the staff-student meeting has some idea of the degree of dissatisfaction in any particular area.*
8. *A College-wide system of student course assessment forms capable of computer analysis should be implemented. Clear reporting and action lines should be established in relation to such information at School, Faculty and College level.*
9. *The College should consider moving to a fully semesterised and modular system.....This would enable the College to market heavily in the USA for students to attend for one semester... .*
10. *Thought should be given by the College to paring down the number of joint honor courses. The problem of some smaller schools being dependent on some of these programmes will be reduced if the College moves to a semester and modular system which allows students the opportunity to take some modules outwith those necessary for the particular programme they are pursuing.*
11. *The College should review its Estate Strategy and use of endowment funds to ensure that general purpose humanities teaching rooms are not neglected in favour of science laboratories or special purpose facilities.*
12. *To capitalise on the introduction of Religious Studies into Irish schools, the School should ensure that its courses are adequately represented in the H.Dip.Ed. programme, and should consider being represented in the modular 'in-service' courses organised on a country-wide basis by the College's Department of Education.*

### **Research**

13. *Given that the Irish government is funding research at only 75-80% of UK levels and that this is directly impacting upon TCD and no doubt other research-intensive universities in Ireland, there is plainly a case for the organisation of Irish Universities to begin an active campaign urging the government to take seriously the basic requirements for a knowledge-led economy.*
14. *The School should strengthen its research output by agreeing with the College an explicit system of*

*supported sabbatical leave.*

15. *The School should give immediate attention to the development of a taught graduate course with a substantial element of research methodology.*
16. *Consultation between the Irish School of Ecumenics and the School, hopefully leading to collaboration between the two, could usefully be initiated by the School. The College should consider facilitating such consultation.*

#### **Administration**

17. *There should be a review, with external participation, of the administrative support required for the present and foreseeable future needs of the School... . The possibility of involving volunteers, on a strictly limited but supported and valued basis, should be investigated.*
18. *The College should ensure that all part-time staff have signed contracts in place before they begin work in any academic year. A formal system should be instituted, preferably managed by the Head of School or Dean of the Faculty, to review with these staff members the progress they are making in their careers and to make any suggestions thought appropriate. Opportunities for taking staff development courses should be provided and attendance at a reasonable number per annum mandated.*
19. *The College should bring all members of the School together into the same floor and area of the Arts Building. Moving the Weingreen Museum to a better location would open up some space to achieve this.*
20. *The School should appoint a task force (a) to conduct an enquiry into the attitudes of school leavers towards theological and religious studies at university level, and (b) energetically to transform the quality of communication between the School and [secondary] schools.*
21. *A meeting should be held as soon as possible between the School and the International Office to consider how recruitment of US students is currently fostered and to see what can be done to improve this. US Colleges and High Schools currently being visited by the International Office could also be scheduled for occasional visits by colleagues from the School, perhaps when they are already in the US for conferences or other purposes.*
22. *The College should ask the Staff Development [Office] to conduct a user survey to see how its provision could be (a) more widely taken up, (b) put on at more convenient times, and (c) (where necessary) improved as to its delivery.*
23. *The College should seriously consider moving the Weingreen Museum to a different venue on the campus, perhaps a small quality building of which it has sole occupation, so that its profile can be raised and its collections properly displayed and utilised.... Some thought should be given to housing the coin collection of the Department of Classics in the same building, especially in view of the evolving collaboration between the School and that Department in relation to the new Mediterranean and Near Eastern Studies programme.*
24. *The present activity of the Careers Advisory Service in following up career destinations of graduates after graduation should be modified to include the automatic despatch to the School of details of the careers commenced by its students (on a student-by-student basis), in addition to the copy of the composite HEA report the School currently receives. The School should each year give careful consideration to this information so that it may be utilised in relation to marketing to potential undergraduates and in connection with course design. Regular meetings should occur between the Service and the School's liaison officer to ensure that they fully understand each other's needs and operations.*
25. *The School should find a way of assessing the risks to its future viability, performance and reputation, bearing particularly in mind its heavy dependence upon part-time teaching, including that of retired people.*

#### **4. RESPONSES FROM THE DEPARTMENT AND DEAN OF FACULTY**

The Dean commented that although the Report did not "*dwell on the many excellent features*" of the School, nevertheless it was clear that the reviewers "*gained a very positive impression of the School*". He considered that the Report "*provides a vindication of the School's work and offers many valuable suggestions for its future development, as well as proposing a number of issues on which the reviewers feel it would be valuable to reflect*". The School welcomed the reviewers' recognition of its "*capacity ... for dynamic growth*" as evidenced in recent developments, but felt that the uniqueness of the research project in Mediterranean and Near Eastern Studies and the extent to which its development could be attributed to initiatives within the School had been understated.

In response to the reviewers' commentary under the heading 'Matters for Reflection: Identity', the School

notes that the questions they raise have long been the subject of discussion within the School. "*Theology' is understood in the School as critical thinking within, and critical encounter with, the faith tradition.....The three traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are, moreover, each in its own way, fundamentally and structurally linked in their engagement with foundational texts. Biblical Studies has a major and unique role, in relation not only to its place within the Jewish and Christian traditions, but also to the historical and religious study of the pre-Christian Mediterranean world. The School is thus generally happy 'about the nature and rationale of the experience being offered to students at undergraduate level'.*" The School acknowledges that its current title is problematical and suggests that the issue of title "*will become acute*" should the School develop courses in Islamic studies. The Dean found these and other questions raised by the reviewers under this heading to be "*pertinent*" and concurred with their view that such issues, including the future of the School's relationship with the Irish School of Ecumenics, should be reconsidered. Both the Dean and the School recognised that there was a need to improve communications with secondary schools about the nature and content of the School's courses with a view to attracting more students. The School proposes a twofold approach consisting of, on one hand, administering questionnaires to determine the general attitude in secondary schools towards 'religion' and 'theology', and, on the other, a campaign to promote the School's courses. It notes that "*tentative steps*" have been undertaken with regard to the latter, but that additional help and expertise would be required in relation to the former. The Dean also notes that the School is sensible of the potential benefits in terms of recruitment that could result from representation of its subject areas in 'in-service' courses for teachers.

In their responses to the reviewers' recommendations on teaching, both the Dean and the School point to progress made since the visitation in terms of the adoption by the Faculty of a written statement of the characteristics and quality of work required for the attainment of various levels of achievement at undergraduate level. The School further notes that the "*regular provision of course handouts for students is also generally encouraged and is a practice followed by most staff*". The Dean points out that a centrally-supported system of course assessments with computerised analysis of feedback was introduced by College on a pilot basis in 2001/02. Highlighting some factual errors in the Report, both the Dean and the School pointed out that the School does in fact operate a system of student representation at School meetings, and confirmed that the School's courses are all half-year courses, with the exception of those in the Junior Freshman year. The issue of whether a modular course structure should be adopted throughout College was also touched on by the Dean who suggested that "*perhaps it would be worthwhile revisiting the proposal, particularly in the context of the introduction of the 'broad curriculum'*". With regard to the reviewers' reference to rigidities in timetabling arising from the number of joint honor options, the Dean noted that a review of the Two Subject Moderatorship programme is currently being undertaken. However, he suggested that certain combinations "*may be available because of the way other subjects are timetabled. It does not follow that a freeing-up of the TSM timetable occurs if some of the options are eliminated.*"

In relation to research, the Dean agreed that "*a more formal policy*" of supported research leave for staff was desirable, particularly in view of the difficulty which small departments often have in organising periods of regular study leave for members of staff. For its part the School noted the recommendation that attention be given to the development of a taught graduate programme, but remarked that it "*would have welcomed more precisely formulated proposals*".

On the question of administrative support for the School, both the Dean and School welcomed the establishment of an additional administrative post in the Faculty to provide assistance to Heads of Department. Noting the reviewers' recommendations with regard to departmental accommodation, the Dean reported that the addition of a new storey to the Arts Building has permitted some degree of reorganisation of office space, and that all staff members of the School will shortly be located in the same area of the building. The Dean recognised the deficiencies alluded to by the reviewers in terms of the quality of teaching space in the Arts Building, and while acknowledging that "*no instant solution is available to this problem*", suggests that improvements in this regard "*must be one of the longer-term priorities of the College*". In response to the suggestions put forward by the reviewers concerning the Weingreen museum, the School emphasised the importance of the museum as "*primarily an academic resource*" for undergraduate and postgraduate students of the School and of the School of Classics' course in Ancient History and Archaeology, and anticipated "*its wider use in the Mediterranean and Near Eastern Studies development*". The problem of finding suitable alternative housing for the collection, and the potential insurance and supervision costs associated with maintaining the collection on public view, were also highlighted.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNCIL

In addition to the School addressing the detailed recommendations outlined in the review report, the following recommendations are made to Council in light of the review report and the responses from the School and the Dean:

- (a) that the School should:
  - 1. Continue to build on its fine achievements in teaching and research.
  - 2. Address the questions raised in the Report with regard to the School's identity and the coherence of its teaching programme, culminating in the not too distant future in an appropriate change of name.
  - 3. Continue to explore ways of attracting more high-calibre students to the study of religion, including international students.
  - 4. Consider the development of a taught masters programme.
  - 5. Explore further the potential for teaching and research links with the Irish School of Ecumenics.
  
- (b) that the Faculty should:
  - 1. Assist the School in reviewing the additional administrative support required by and provided to the School.
  
- (c) that the College should:
  - 1. Seek to fill the Chair of Theology (1980).
  - 2. Support the School in its schools liaison and recruitment activities.
  - 3. Invite the Bursar to give urgent consideration to the Report's recommendations in relation to the School's accommodation and the quality of teaching space in the Arts Building.
  - 4. Support the School in its plans for future development once the School has clarified its identity and mission.

John Hegarty  
**Provost**

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