

## **FINAL ASSESSMENT REPORT**

### **Institutional Quality Assurance Program (IQAP) Review**

#### **Religious Studies M.A, Ph.D.**

**Date of Review: April 19 and 20, 2023**

*In accordance with the University Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP), this final assessment report provides a synthesis of the external evaluation and the internal response and assessments of the graduate programs delivered by Religious Studies. This report identifies the significant strengths of the program, together with opportunities for program improvement and enhancement, and it sets out and prioritizes the recommendations that have been selected for implementation.*

*The report includes an Implementation Plan that identifies who will be responsible for approving the recommendations set out in the Final Assessment Report; who will be responsible for providing any resources entailed by those recommendations; any changes in organization, policy or governance that will be necessary to meet the recommendations and who will be responsible for acting on those recommendations; and timelines for acting on and monitoring the implementation of those recommendations.*

#### **Executive Summary of the Review**

In accordance with the Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP), the department of Religious Studies submitted a self-study in February 2023 to the Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies to initiate the cyclical program review of its graduate programs. The approved self-study presented program descriptions, learning outcomes, and analyses of data provided by the Office of Institutional Research and Analysis. Appendices to the self-study contained the CVs for each full-time member in the department.

Two arm's length external reviewers and one internal reviewer were endorsed by the Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, and selected by the Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies. The review team reviewed the self-study documentation and then conducted a review on April 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023. The review included interviews with the Deputy Provost; Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies, Associate Dean, Graduate Studies, Chair of the department and meetings with groups of current students, faculty and support staff.

The Chair of the Department and the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences submitted responses to the Reviewers' Report (July and October 2023 respectively). Specific recommendations were discussed and clarifications and corrections were presented. Follow-up actions and timelines were included.

## **Strengths**

- Faculty
- Graduate students
- Program learning outcomes
- Graduate degree level expectations
- Curriculum
- Speakers and symposia
- Seminars
- Supervision
- Inclusion of Graduate students in program governance

## **Areas for Improvement:**

- Clarify language used to describe fields and areas
- Clarify goals and format for comprehensive exams
- Clarify expectations for the MA project
- Fifth-year funding: work towards guaranteeing students' funding for a fifth year
- Increase frequency of contact between chair of Graduate Affairs Committee and GSARS
- Language instruction: work towards the creation of a consortium of institutions to share instructors and students
- Enhance the University's resources for international graduate student support

## **Implementation Plan**

### **Summary of the Reviewers' Recommendations with the Department's and Dean's Responses**

| <b>Recommendation</b>  | <b>Proposed Follow-Up</b>  | <b>Responsibility for Leading Follow-Up</b> | <b>Timeline for Addressing Recommendation</b> |
|--|--|---|---|
| value humanities and discursive social science in future strategic plan and vision documents (University)  | Bring forward for discussion at Chairs and Directors bi-weekly meetings  | Department Chair                            | 2023-26                                       |
| explore interdisciplinary programs that align with areas of research strength at McMaster and priorities of indigeneity and inclusive excellence | Ongoing consultation and brainstorming with graduate programs in Social Sciences, Humanities, Health Sciences, and Business. | Department Chair and GAC Chair              | 2023-2026                                     |

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| (Department; Faculty of Social Sciences)   |   |                             |             |
| explore the feasibility of a common MA application portal (Department)   | Consult with Mosaic team and SGS  | Graduate Administrator      | 2023-24     |
| clarify (but do not necessarily change) the curriculum, not only for its own sake, but also to foreground the cross-field pollination that already occurs in the department (Department) | Encourage discussion and proposals at GAC to be brought to the Department for discussion                            | GAC Chair                   | 2023-24     |
| form a consortium of institutions to ease barriers in language instruction for the programs' graduate students (Department; Faculty of Social Sciences)                                  | Consult with the Dean of Graduate Studies for institutional support   | Department Chair            | 2023-25     |
| monitor the one-year MA degree's PLO and DLE's in relation to the two-year MA degree (Department)  | Carry out an evaluation of the initial one-year MA in Summer 2024   | Department Chair, GAC Chair | Summer 2024 |
| clarify the two-year MA project objectives and requirements (Department)   | To be explored and redrafted by the GAC committee   | GAC Chair                   | 2023-24     |
| clarify and possibly revise the comprehensive exam goals and assessment format (Department)  | To be explored and redrafted by the GAC committee   | GAC Chair                   | 2023-25     |
| increase frequency of contact between the Graduate Chair and the Graduate Student Association for Religious Studies (GSARS), in the interest of developing programming that will         | In early September, confirm a schedule of meetings of the GAC chair and GSARS representatives for the academic year | GAC Chair                   | 2023-24     |

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| help rebuild departmental community  |   |                                   |                             |
| form consortium for language instruction (Department; Faculty of Social Sciences)  | See above   |                                   |                             |
| explore feasibility of new area structure for three-term MA <i>only</i> (Department)   | Note: The three field structure is not directly relevant to the one-year MA, as there are no field-based course requirements. No action required.                 |                                   |                             |
| keep CLA instructors of undergraduates who sustain fifth-year graduate-student funding (Department; Faculty of Social Sciences)  | Consult with the Dean of the Faculty of Social Science about the need for a teaching permanence for our CLA instructors.  | Department Chair                  | Conclusion of CLA contracts |
| support the research mission of Religious Studies (and other humanities and social sciences) with adequate acquisitions of monographs and other relevant resources, including relevant subject area staff (University) | Consultation with the University Librarian.   | Chair and Library Rep.            |                             |
| create a professional development course for all entering MA and PhD students (Department)   | Consult with the MacPherson Institute regarding resources available through the Institute and assistance for developing in-house professional development courses | Chair of GAC                      | 2023-24                     |
| enhance international graduate student support through a dedicated office and programs (University)  | Ongoing   | Department Chair and Chair of GAC |                             |

## **Dean's Response, Faculty of Social Sciences**

The IQAP review team consisting of external members Dr. Adnan Husain (Director, School of Religion, Queen's University) and Martin Kavka (Chair, Department of Religion, Florida State University), and internal member Dr. Tony Porter (Department of Political Science), conducted its review of the Graduate program of the Department of Religious Studies on April 19-20, 2023. I thank the reviewers for their review and recommendations regarding how to enhance the graduate program in Religious Studies. The recommendations will be helpful to both the department and me in the coming years as we undertake further efforts to strengthen the program. Herein I provide my response to the report.

The reviewers' assessment of the program is highly positive. They note in particular the high quality of the faculty participating in the program and the commitment they have to its graduate students, recent innovations introduced by the program, including a new one-year MA stream and the introduction of Islamic Studies as a concentration, and both the quality of its students and their praise for the program. However, the graduate program, like its undergraduate counterpart, faces a longer-term trend of declining enrolments as student program choices have in recent years shifted away from religious studies (and similar programs). Recent program changes can help reverse these enrolment trends (initial signs suggest an impact), and the review identifies further actions the program can take to improve the program and make it attractive for a broader array of students.

The Faculty of Social Sciences values the graduate program in Religious Studies greatly. The graduate program in the Department of Religious Studies has always been one of the strongest in the Faculty of Social Sciences and one that attracts high-quality graduate students from around the world. The Department has always rightly been proud of it. At the same time, there is a perception that the program has at times been slow to adapt to changes in the external environment, most importantly evolving student interests and falling student enrolments in both graduate and undergraduate programs in Religious Studies and associated consequences such as a smaller faculty complement.

The recent innovations noted by the reviewers together with robust department responses to the reviewer recommendations as outlined in the department response can help ensure a strong program into the future. The majority the recommendations call for action by the program/Department itself. The Faculty of Social Sciences, including both me as Dean and the Associate Dean Graduate Studies will support the program in acting on those recommendations. I focus my response on those recommendations with implications beyond the program and department.

1. A call for the university to value discursive social science in strategic and vision documents. McMaster is supportive of the humanities and social sciences, but this remains a constant challenge in the face of so many forces internal and external to the university that place priority on STEM. As Dean I work regularly with my fellow Deans and senior leaders to ensure that the social sciences and humanities are valued within McMaster.

2. Interdisciplinary programming. Interdisciplinary programming is a priority of the Faculty of Social Sciences. In recent years we have, for instance, introduced a number of interdisciplinary minors and certificates and participates in multiple university-wide interdisciplinary minors. The Department of

Religious Studies, especially at the undergraduate level, has also worked in recent years to connect with other disciplines and fields. These efforts can be expanded to the graduate level. The reviewers rightly identify potential linkages with the recently formed Indigenous Studies Department, which is itself launching a new master's program. The Faculty will support Religious Studies in such efforts.

3. Participate in Language Training Consortium. I strongly endorse this recommendation. I had spoken with the Department Chair, Dr. Celia Rothenberg, prior to the IQAP review, about the need to collaborate with regional universities to enhance opportunities for language training. She has reached out to colleagues in other universities and discussions are on-going. The Faculty of Social Sciences will readily participate in such a collaborative venture.

4. Keep CLA (Contractually Limited Appointment) Instructors to sustain funding for fifth-year students. The amount of funding support for graduate students in Religious Studies is determined by graduate enrolment. Undergraduate enrolment in courses taught by CLAs has no bearing on support available for fifth-year students.

5. Support for International Students. The university (and each Faculty) has been and continues to invest to support international students. The Faculty welcomes collaboration with the School of Graduate Students and other relevant offices on campus in such efforts targeted at graduate students.

### **Quality Assurance Committee Recommendation**

McMaster's Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) reviewed the above documentation at the December 6, 2023, meeting. The committee recommends that the Religious Studies graduate programs should follow the regular course of action with an 18-month progress report and subsequent full external cyclical review to be conducted no later than eight years after the start of the last review.