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 the Religious Studies department. 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.

This Final Assessment Report includes an Implementation Plan that identifies who will be responsible leading the follow up for the proposed recommendations; any changes in organization, policy or governance that will be necessary to meet the recommendations; and timelines for acting on and monitoring the implementation of those recommendations.

Executive Summary of the Religious Studies Cyclical Program Review

The Religious Studies Program submitted a self-study to the School of Graduate Studies December 2014. The self-study presented the program descriptions and learning outcomes, an analytical assessment of these two programs, and program data including the data collected from a student survey along with the standard data package prepared by the Office of Institutional Research and Analysis. Appended were the course outlines for all courses in the program and the CVs for each full-time faculty member in the Department.

Two external reviewers and one internal reviewer examined the materials and completed a site visit in January 2015. The visit included interviews with the Provost and Vice-President (Academic); Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences; Dean of School of Graduate Studies; Chair of the Department of Religious Studies, and meetings with groups of current students, full-time and part-time faculty and support staff.

In their report the review team noted that the McMaster Religious Studies department was one of the best and most rigorous programs in North America, with notable strength in Asian religions, biblical studies, and religion in the West (which includes, most recently, Islam). The Department has a distinguished and productive faculty whose reputation is international in scope. The review team noted the following areas as particularly noteworthy: (a) the Department’s commitment to mentoring graduate students, ensuring the timely completion of their studies, (b) its determination to equip students with the professional skills that will make them competitive on the job market, and (c) its commitment to offering the advanced languages necessary to many of its areas. Under the able leadership of the chair, non-teaching staff work
hard to make the program function smoothly and efficiently. The overall ethos of the department is one of serious scholarship and learning in an atmosphere of collegiality.

The review team noted that despite its overall excellence, the Department faces a number of challenges, some more critical than others. These can be grouped into two broad rubrics, one related to the Department faculty, and the other to students and courses.

The following program strengths and weakness were also noted:

- **Strengths**
  - As noted throughout the report, “The Department has a distinguished and productive faculty whose reputation is international in scope.”
  - The Department is committed to mentoring their graduate students and ensuring the timely completion of their studies.
  - The Department equips students with the professional and pedagogical skills necessary for their careers.
  - The Department works hard to ensure that students receive the necessary specialised language training for their degrees.
  - The Department is collegial and well run.
  - The Department is committed to creativity and innovation.
  - The Department is attentive to student feedback.

- **Weaknesses**
  - The Biblical field is at risk due to two imminent departures.
  - The Asian field continues to be understaffed, as noted in the previous review (2003).
  - There are student concerns about insufficient graduate seminars in some areas.
  - Required languages and other courses are offered by faculty on unpaid overload.
  - There are issues of diversity and gender balance in the composition of both faculty and student bodies.
  - Some required languages (e.g. Arabic, intermediate/advanced Chinese) are not offered within the University.
  - There is insufficient funding to support the number of excellent visa students who apply to the department.
## Summary of the Reviewers’ Recommendations with the Department’s and Dean’s Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Proposed Follow-Up</th>
<th>Responsibility for Leading Follow-Up</th>
<th>Timeline for Addressing Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two positions in Biblical Studies—one in early Christianity to replace Runesson, and another in early Judaism to replace Schuller—are immediately necessary to allow the Biblical area to function.</td>
<td>One position has already been approved by the Dean of Social Sciences. We will continue to seek a second.</td>
<td>Department Chair in consultation with the Dean.</td>
<td>One hire to be made in AY 2015–16 to start July 1 2016. Another hire is yet to be approved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased funding opportunities for visa students.</td>
<td>The Department will explore opportunities within the University for increased funding available to visa students.</td>
<td>Chair in consultation with Faculty of Social Sciences and School of Graduate Studies.</td>
<td>Aim to have better funding in place for AY 2016–17.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library Support.</td>
<td>The Department will explore opportunities for increased library support for the graduate programs.</td>
<td>Chair and Department Library rep.</td>
<td>Aim for increased monograph and serials support for AY 2016–17.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language training: Recognition of faculty overload teaching of languages.</td>
<td>The Chair will discuss with the Dean protocols for recognition of overload teaching (both languages and reading courses)</td>
<td>Chair.</td>
<td>Aim to have protocol in place prior to next Teaching Resources meeting in November or December 2015.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language training: Long-term solution to the teaching of Hebrew.</td>
<td>Chair, Graduate Affairs, and Biblical field will explore possibilities for teaching Hebrew in conjunction with faculty search in Biblical Studies.</td>
<td>Chair, in consultation with GAC and Biblical field.</td>
<td>Aim to have plan for Hebrew in place for AY 2016–17.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area</td>
<td>Current Action</td>
<td>Responsible Party</td>
<td>Progress</td>
</tr>
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<td>-------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language training: Additional language support within the University. Opportunities to add Arabic, Persian, intermediate/advanced Chinese etc.</td>
<td>Chair will enquire about opportunities for further language teaching within the University.</td>
<td>Chair.</td>
<td>Ongoing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language training: French and German courses for graduate students to be offered regularly.</td>
<td>Deans of Social Sciences and Humanities should work out a regular agreement about French and German.</td>
<td>Dean of Social Sciences.</td>
<td>Aim to have a regular plan for teaching of French and German in place for AY 2016–17.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of faculty and PhD students.</td>
<td>The hiring committee will be attentive to issues of diversity and gender balance during tenure-track searches. Graduate affairs will explore options for increased recruitment of female PhD students.</td>
<td>Hiring committee. Graduate Affairs Committee.</td>
<td>Ongoing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty complement in Asian Religions</td>
<td>We appreciate the suggestions made by the reviewers regarding the areas of expertise of proposed hires in the Asian field. We will discuss this as part of our strategic hiring plan.</td>
<td>Chair.</td>
<td>Ongoing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Training in Teaching. Opportunities for advanced PhD students to teach in the program.

Provisions are already in place to offer increased teaching opportunities to PhD students.

Chair. Ongoing.

Graduate Courses.

We appreciate the suggestions made by the reviewers regarding 701 (Issues in the Study of Religion) and the 4-year rotation of seminars. We have no immediate plans to adopt those suggestions, but henceforth the Graduate Affairs Committee will exercise increased oversight of the entire graduate curriculum.

Graduate Affairs Committee. Increased oversight of the graduate curriculum by GAC in place for AY 2015–16.

Dean’s Response:

**Hiring:** The reviewers note the urgent need for hires in two fields, namely Biblical Studies and Asian Studies. As of today, the Department of Religious Studies has been given the go ahead to hire a tenure track faculty member in 2015-16 in the Biblical field, replacing the loss of two faculty in this field. Any future hires will need to be justified on the basis of undergraduate and graduate student enrollments and budgetary considerations. The Faculty is strongly supportive of these programs and will work hard with the department to maintain their excellence.

The Dean noted that, consistent with her commitment to faculty equity, she would support the reviewer’s recommendations that the department pay close attention to equity considerations in their hiring processes and decisions.

**Teaching responsibilities:** The Dean noted the she would welcome a proposal from the Department on the possibility of offering some additional graduate courses wherein faculty members teach more than one graduate seminar in a year. This would need to be balanced with faculty resource demands and would need to ensure equity amongst existing faculty members.

**Language requirements and teaching:** The teaching of languages is proving a challenge across the university system as small classes and declining student registration in language majors make these a less efficient use of faculty resources. However gaining fluency in multiple languages is critical to many areas of advanced study, including Religious Studies. The Chair of this Department and the Dean have had several conversations about how we can ensure that students achieve their required level of fluency in a language to achieve academic success at a
reasonable cost to the Faculty. The Dean would encourage the Department to look at solutions offered elsewhere in the University system, with an eye to finding a solution that optimally uses the resources available to ensure student access to suitable courses.

In languages where few students are registered to study, it is possible that the existing model of individual tutoring by faculty members makes the most sense. The Department would be encouraged to propose a method of compensating faculty involved in such tutoring that would then be discussed with the Dean.

To address the identified challenges in securing adequate upper year courses in French and German for graduate students, the Dean of Social Sciences would welcome a meeting between the Dean of Humanities, and the Department heads of Religious Studies and relevant language courses to see if we can find a suitable and stable arrangement for this language instruction.

**Student Experience:** The Department is to be applauded for offering such a rich student educational experience. The Faculty supports the many efforts by the Department in preparing students for their post graduate experience in the labour market and, hopefully for some, in academe. The reviewers commented on the seeming lack of teaching opportunities for senior level PhD candidates. They rightfully note that such experience is increasingly important for graduates to be competitive in the academic job market. The University’s new system for PhD sessional teaching combined with the Faculty reorientation of the Inquiry curriculum is expected to address this challenge.

**International students:** The reviewers note the importance of having international students in the graduate cohort and the difficulties these students face as a result of weak financial support systems. The Dean agrees that international students are an important part of the fabric of the University and contribute greatly to our understanding of the world. The Dean noted that she has been committed to developing an internationalization plan for the Faculty that will address many questions, including how we can better support international students. In the immediate term, the Faculty has increased its financial support to international students from $6000 to $10,000 per year and has frozen international tuition for this coming year. I would encourage faculty to use their research grants to support international students.

**Space:** The Faculty will work with the Department to improve where possible the space available to graduate students.

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**Quality Assurance Committee Recommendations**

The QAC recommends that the program should follow the regular course of action with an 18-month progress report and a subsequent full external cyclical review to be conducted no later than 8 years after the start of the last review.