

Institution: University of Chester
Unit of Assessment: D31 Theology and Religious Studies
1. Unit context and structure, research and impact strategy

The Department of Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) at the University of Chester rests its claim to research excellence on its commitment to sustainability, transparency and public impact in our research activity. We combine attention to rigour and accountability alongside concerns for equality and diversity, values that are embodied in the shared management of research activity as well as shaping the priorities of colleagues' research across the sub-disciplines of Theology (Systematic: **Clough, Fulford**; Practical/Contextual: **Bacon, Graham, Morris**); Religious Studies (Historical: **Jones, Vincent**; Social-Scientific: **Dossett, El-Yousfi; Knowles, Llewellyn, Tee**), and Biblical Studies (**Collins, Evans, Middleton**).

Institutional Context

The Unit corresponds with the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, which sits within the School of Humanities in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities.

The Faculty is managed by a Dean with two Directors of School (Humanities; Arts & Media). Leadership and coordination of the unit's research strategy rests with the Research Advisory Group (RAG), comprising **Bacon, Graham, Middleton and Vincent**: Head of Department (chair) and three senior academics, representing the Department's sub-disciplines.

TRS has historically been one of the pioneering research-active departments within the University of Chester, and our research ambitions and infrastructure have evolved alongside those of an institution with a vibrant tradition of impact through vocational education and public service. TRS continues to exercise research leadership within the University: e.g. **Morris** is Faculty research lead and on the University's REF Steering Group; **Graham** and **Vincent** have served on the University Research Committee; **Vincent** was on the committee which carried out the institutional REF2014 performance review.

Reflection on REF2014

Our REF2014 analysis indicated we achieved many of our strategic goals for the period 2008–14: in particular, the establishment of a sustainable and vital research culture with a rising international profile (individually and collectively). Yet we also concluded there were a number of priorities that could be further developed, especially a more targeted and well-articulated research strategy, supported by a clearly identified means of facilitating and measuring strategic outcomes.

In order to create a strategy that was fit for purpose, and to support the Department to achieve its research ambitions, we identified strategic aims appropriate to the unit's current state of development. We reflected that our journey over the last twenty years had been characterised by three distinct phases. TRS Chester first emerged as a viable unit of 4FTE, one of six units submitted by the University, in RAE2001. After RAE2008 (5.75FTE), the Department entered a second phase of rapid expansion, more than doubling in size through a strategy of hiring Early Career Researchers supplemented by established academics from other institutions. This phase was characterised by a conscious investment in sustainable growth, developing ECRs' international profiles through publication and conference participation. Of the 11.1FTEs (2/3 of the Department) entered in REF2014, seven were ECRs.

Our strategy for the current REF cycle recognised the Department is populated primarily by mid-career and more senior researchers, and so this third phase has focussed more on consolidation and sustainability. We prioritised growth in research vitality, stature, and reputation of both individuals and the unit, measured through **outputs, grant capture** and **impact** activity. There has been remarkable continuity in staffing within this cycle. Of 14.5FTEs, only 2.5 have joined the Department since 2014. Our research strategy therefore focussed on enabling established scholars

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to achieve their research ambitions in order to reach the next stage in their academic careers. We achieved this through robust and transparent structures capable of demonstrably promoting and delivering a clear, accountable, sustainable and vibrant research environment, gauged by high-quality research outputs, innovative research activities, continued growth in PGR recruitment and retention, and forms of community and stakeholder engagement.

Research Strategy 2014-2021

In order to realise our aspirations to greater research excellence, the RAG was formed and charged with devising and implementing a clear research strategy consistent with the Department's core principles of **inclusivity**, **accountability**, and **transparency**, informed by the university's mission and strategy. This strategy built on the substantial development achieved over the previous REF cycle by further enhancing the research environment, taking account of our individual and collective research ambitions as mid-career and senior researchers. We committed to focus on increasing the quality and quantity of published research **outputs**, improving success rates of external **grant capture**, and identifying, developing and managing high quality **impact**.

After a period of consultation through regular departmental meetings and a dedicated Away Day, we finalised and agreed a new strategy consisting of six priorities:

- To enhance the quality, character and reach of research **outputs** and activities;
- To identify and support research projects likely to obtain external **funding**;
- To promote engagement in research activities that **impact** on thinking, policies and/or practices in a range of contexts, nationally and internationally;
- To promote **equality and diversity** in research activities;
- To increase recruitment of high-quality students to **PGR** programmes, and enhance provision of support and training;
- To foster cross-disciplinary, cross-institutional and international **research collaborations**.

Each priority was accompanied by several concrete actions for implementation as a means of measuring progress. For example, enhancing the quality, character and reach of research outputs and activities included commitments to provide regular time for research in staff workload, provision of periods of research leave, and allocation of resources to support academic staff with research responsibility, including the continuation of institutional funding to support research activity.

Impact Strategy

Immediately following REF2014, a Department Away Day review of current research identified six projects with impact potential in and beyond the current cycle. The project leaders all received internal funding for buy-out from regular duties in order to create time to produce draft 'pathways to impact' documents. After reviewing these proposals, RAG selected two case studies to receive further support and mentoring.

In order to ensure future sustainability, internal funding streams are also used strategically in order to strengthen other pathways to impact within Departmental research activity. Colleagues are encouraged to bid for Departmental QR money to be used for a range of activities (e.g., teaching buy-out, research assistantships, grant-writing support, external consultancy) to create space and time to develop the impact potential of their projects.

Implementation of Strategy

Pre-2014 structures to support individual staff research based around sub-disciplinary subject clusters have been replaced by a more comprehensive and broad-based system of collective peer review, both for the selection of prospective REF publications and to assist with various types of work in progress, including publishable outputs and funding applications. Similarly, while provision for research leave remains open to all research-active staff, further levels of accountability have been introduced through processes of reporting to RAG and then to the departmental meeting, where research is a standing item.

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RAG meets six times a year to coordinate all aspects of departmental research activity, including mechanisms for supporting, monitoring and evaluating research outputs; identifying and nurturing impact case studies at an early stage; supporting new ideas for research funding bids; and creating and sustaining a supportive environment for colleagues at all stages of their research careers. These structures have had a demonstrable impact on research productivity, measured in terms of **outputs**, **funding**, and **impact**:

- Over the period 2014–2020, published **outputs** have more than doubled from the previous cycle. This includes significant monographs and articles in high quality journals.
- Members of the Department have secured over £1.3 million in external **grant income**, compared to just under £160,000 in the previous cycle. Additionally, **Scharbrodt** was awarded a €1.9 million ERC grant prior to his appointment by Birmingham.
- Pathways to **impact** have been strengthened through processes of identifying potential projects and allocating resources to release staff to develop their proposals. In addition to our two Impact Case Studies, we record other instances of public engagement and dissemination in Section 4.

We have also achieved our strategic aims in terms of **equality and diversity**, **PGR student recruitment**, and **collaborative research** as discussed below. These demonstrate the successful consolidation and development of the Department's research culture, and provide clear evidence of both the sustainability and the vitality of our research activity.

Research strategy beyond 2021

The Department strategy 2021–2026 responds to the University's strategic priorities in the areas of Health and Wellbeing, Culture and Society, and Sustainability and the Environment, while maintaining our commitment to naming a specific set of core priorities with clear measurable actions:

- Support the production of world-leading and internationally excellent research, including **impactful research** that has the potential to inform and benefit the economy, public policy and wider society at regional, national and international levels.
- Increase our success with **grant capture** and support the incubation of fundable research.
- Diversify our research environment and increase the **recruitment of international students** to all our PGR programmes.
- Promote and integrate values of **inclusion and diversity** as a measure of research excellence.

2. People

2a Staffing strategy and staff development

In keeping with the University Mission, our staffing strategy and approach to staff development derive directly from our commitment to **equality and diversity**, **collegiality**, **transparency**, **rigour**, and **accountability**. Within the particular context of a post-92 University, our strategy is especially attentive to safeguarding research excellence against multiple competing demands for staff time and attention. This is particularly evident in our innovative and proactive approach to the **shared ownership of research strategy**, through staff recruitment, development, and joint responsibility for the Department's research culture.

This is evidenced by a number of features: a move towards a more transparent and results-based emphasis in setting goals for individual research leave; an allocation of internal funding designed to maximise opportunities to develop research and impact projects with potential for external grant capture; and the open critical reading groups created to review and score potential REF submissions.

Staffing Strategy

As noted earlier, the strategic aims of the Department since 2014 have focused on sustainability, providing support to colleagues at all stages of their career, including the retention and on-going

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development of high-quality senior academics. This strategy has been successful, as the Department's academic staffing has shown remarkable continuity from 2014–2020.

Shared ownership of research

A distinctive feature of the Department's approach to staff development across all career stages is our view of the development and maintenance of a vibrant research environment as a shared responsibility. Accordingly, we have put in place structures to ensure that this is maintained. Updates on ongoing research projects form a standing item on the departmental meeting agenda. Time is set aside in the calendar of departmental events for peer review of works in progress and open discussion of future research plans, something that represents perhaps the most significant step-change in our research environment since 2014.

The current cycle has been characterised by the implementation of a robust and inclusive process of internal peer review, in which colleagues are invited to meet together to assess and score potential REF submissions. Responsibility for the maintenance of this review process rests with RAG, but *all* members of the Department are invited to participate. This has developed into a mechanism for discussions of pre-published work in progress, draft grant applications and impact case studies. It also represents an important staff development opportunity as colleagues benefit both from reviews of their own outputs and from evaluating the scholarship of others. This is a substantial time commitment, but considered to be of sufficient importance to the Department's **shared research culture** and individual staff development to justify allocating a time allowance to all members of staff through the Department's workload model.

This practice is now firmly embedded in the research culture of the Department, and will be sustained beyond this REF cycle. Moreover, these protocols for reviewing and scoring outputs have been widely commended in Subject Associations, and adopted elsewhere. Our transparent scoring system formed part of the University's submission for its REF Code of Practice in June 2018.

Mentoring/Staff Development

The annual institutional Performance Development Plan (PDP), undertaken with line managers, is the standard mechanism for reviewing staff development plans, including research. In addition, several other strands of research mentorship and accountability are in operation.

In an effort to quickly and effectively integrate new members of staff into the Department's research culture, they are mentored one-to-one by a senior colleague for their first year, with a view to building and maintaining a sustainable research trajectory. After the period of mentorship has expired, staff are encouraged to participate in the various peer-supported research clusters that supplement the main Department reading group, such as "writing Gyms" and peer accountability groups. These are oriented toward setting goals and facilitating critical peer review. They have been instrumental in raising ambitions for publication volume and quality, as well as developing initial ideas for funding bids. For example, pieces by **Dossett** and **Vincent** included in this return developed primarily in the context of peer supported writing sessions, and **Clough's** CreatureKind project originated in a discussion among an accountability group. Additionally, all members of staff are expected to present to the Department research seminar on a regular basis.

Post-Doctoral Researchers (PDRs)

Within a context of relative continuity of core staffing, we have also maintained our momentum in recruiting ECRs whose appointments have often come as a result of successful grant applications. We are particularly conscious of our responsibility to fixed term and post-doctoral researchers in light of our overall staffing strategy, and the challenges facing fixed-term staff members, especially towards the ends of their contracts. A mentor is therefore allocated for the entire duration of their period of employment, rather than the usual one-year term for permanent staff. Fixed-term staff otherwise have access to the same levels of research support as permanent staff.

We take special care with the management and mentoring of PDRs to ensure that even though their primary focus is research, they also benefit from carefully selected teaching and administrative opportunities as a route towards a more senior position. This strategy has proved remarkably

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successful; all PDRs who have been employed in the Department between 2014–2020 have progressed to permanent appointments (**Abid**, Bradford Institute for Health Research; **Ali**, Rutgers University; **Keady**, University of Wales Trinity St David; **Morgan**, Sarum College, University of Winchester; and **Shanneik**, University of Birmingham).

Research Leave/Research Time

In addition to the standard allocation of one day per week for research, and in keeping with the University and Department commitment to **equality**, all permanent members of staff are eligible for four months study leave every four years. A formal research leave proposal is presented to RAG for approval, which is signed off by the Head of Department. Staff who demonstrate sufficient justification are eligible to extend this period by an additional two months. The regular leave cycle is funded as a normal part of the Department's operating budget, but additional QR money has been directed towards the funding of shorter periods of buy-out to promote additional grant writing and impact activity, which has been utilised to good effect by e.g., **Clough**, **Dossett**, **Graham**, and **Vincent**. This model has been a contributing factor to the increase in external **funding capture** over the cycle.

All staff, regardless of contract status, are entitled to an annual staff development allowance to support research activity (e.g. conference participation, fieldwork or archive study). The outcomes of this funding are reported in the annual PDP.

2b. Research Students

The PGR community is an important element of the research culture of the Department and has grown substantially since the institution gained research degree awarding powers in 2007. Historically, TRS pioneered the provision of support and training for PGR students within the University and is still responsible for a significant and disproportionately high number of Chester's PGR population (approximately 12%). An important element of our research strategy has been to enhance the support and research environment for this constituency, evidenced by a strong, regular programme of research training events, and the trebling of successful completions.

Recruitment

We recruit students to Chester on the basis of the disciplinary standing and international reputation of the Department's academics -- individually and collectively -- the scope, breadth and critical mass of PGR students, the quality of our supervision and support (especially for part-time students) and the vitality of the 'learning community' of PGR programmes.

Dedicated support and development of PGR students begins with our recruitment and admissions policy. Prior to formal application, candidates are encouraged to seek extensive feedback on their research proposal from an appropriate future supervisor. All applicants are then interviewed by two members of staff before a decision is made, based on candidates' academic suitability, potential, and departmental capacity to provide supervision. PGR students are expected to attend both departmental and institutional inductions, which introduce University facilities, procedures and, crucially, the research culture of the Department. On admission, all PGR students are allocated a principal and secondary supervisor. We ensure applicants are aware of the full range of facilities on offer in terms of training, support, career development and study skills.

Progression

One of our central strategic aims since 2014 has been to ensure a sustainable research environment which increased progression and completion rates of PGR students. This had two main dimensions: ensuring full compliance with institutional frameworks for progression and monitoring; and developing a comprehensive strategy for PGR training and formation that prepares students to succeed during their University career and beyond. We implemented a plan aimed particularly at retention within a **diverse community** which includes substantial numbers of part-time students, by ensuring the robustness of our administrative and monitoring processes while instituting a proactive training culture to support student flourishing.

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Progression, together with quality management of the PGR experience, is enabled through a number of supportive processes. The University Annual Progress Review system evaluates individual progress against generic expectations appropriate to key stages of registration. Every review requires both student and supervisor to report independently on progress, highlight problems, identify training needs, and undertake forward planning. PhD upgrades are overseen by two independent members of specially trained academic staff, including designated Faculty PGR tutors, who can recommend appropriate action to address any issues identified in the review. This enables student progress to be monitored, but also represents an independent means of student feedback on training needs, supervision, and access to resources.

The quality of the Department's provision is ensured through the University's Continuous Monitoring of Enhancement process, which includes evaluation of key metrics as well as feedback from student liaison meetings. In addition, PGR students are represented on the Faculty Board of Studies. We also place a premium on national measures of quality such as the annual Postgraduate Research Experience Survey, and encourage students to participate. In 2019, this recorded overall satisfaction in TRS provision at 94%.

Training

In order to fulfil our strategic aim to enhance the research environment for our PGR community, and to equip them for successful completion and future employment, progression processes are supplemented by an innovative and extensive programme designed to provide training appropriate to PG students at every stage of their research journey. In the interest of meeting the needs of a diverse cohort of postgraduate research students with work or family commitments, and to encourage attendance, Departmental training is generally held on the same day as the weekly Research Seminar series. As an important demonstration of our shared commitment to our Postgraduate community, all members of the Department share in the provision of training.

Training sessions include core skills such as research ethics, literature reviews, qualitative data analysis, and time management aimed at students early on in their doctoral career, as well as more advanced topics such as getting published, conference planning, digital humanities, and the analysis of key theoretical texts. Recordings of these training sessions are publicly available online, not only for the benefit of our current and potential PGR students, but as a contribution to the wider Academy.

PGR students on the Doctor of Professional Studies programme are offered parallel provision by means of termly residential research seminars, plus an annual summer school for professional doctorate students across four HE centres of excellence in the field (Birmingham, Anglia Ruskin, Glasgow, and Chester). Towards the end of their study period, all research students are offered a formal mock viva.

While providing information and skills-training to support PGR students towards successful completion, the training programme also provides sessions on employability, both in and out of the academy.

In addition to training events, all students are required to participate in our regular programme of research seminars. Students are also required to present a paper at the Department seminar or a dedicated PGR symposium as a condition of their upgrade to PhD status. This is an integral aspect of academic formation, and helps to forge the principles and practices of peer review, to the mutual benefit of both presenter and audience. A simple but highly effective measure adopted within all our seminars to build student confidence in a professional research environment has been to give PGR students priority in Q&A during research seminars.

These measures have proven successful in instilling PGR candidates with the skills to participate in national and international conferences, for which bursaries have been available to students giving papers. Chester doctoral students have presented papers at many conferences, including AAR, BIAPT, BNTS, EABS, ISRLC, SBL, and SOCREL.

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PGR Outcomes

Our strategy to support PGR students at all stages of their study and beyond has been particularly successful, as evidenced by rates of retention and completion, publication, and job placement. There has been a strong improvement in retention, particularly in the part time constituency. We have trebled the number of doctoral awards from 19 in the period 2008–2013 to 57 between 2014–2020.

Chester PhD and DProf students have made independent contributions to their fields through the publication of articles in journals such as: *Biblical Interpretation*, *Ecclesial Practices*, *Implicit Religion*, *Journal of Anglican Studies*, *Journal of Global Buddhism*, *Journal of Jewish Studies*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience*, *Material Religion*, *Practical Theology*, *Theology and Sexuality*, and *Studies in Higher Education*.

Finally, the success of our PGR provision can be evidenced by the achievements of Chester graduates who have been appointed to academic positions at institutions such as Durham University, Manchester University, York St John University, Wesley House Cambridge, and the University of Winchester, or who have been able to utilize their doctoral skills for career progression outside of the academy, such as the current Anglican bishop of Egbu, Nigeria.

2c. Equality and Diversity

The promotion of a research environment characterised by Equality and Diversity has been one of our key strategic aims since 2014, as well as a central topic of research for many colleagues within the Department (e.g. **Bacon, Dossett, Llewellyn, Morris, Vincent**). The success of our actions can be measured in several important publications and funded projects on Equality and Diversity issues, the greater diversity of our PGR population, our attention to mental health and well-being as a sign of institutional resilience, and in our efforts to overcome a gender imbalance at professorial rank.

Staff and students together represent a full range of religious belief and non-belief, and care is taken to ensure that no disadvantage is incurred on these grounds. Similarly, staff and students who are pregnant or with childcare responsibilities are positively supported through the appropriate HR and/or Registry mechanisms, and a range of domestic arrangements, including but not limited to marriage and civil partnership, may be observed among staff and students with no detriment ascribed to any particular configuration. Gender reassignment is protected not only through the standard legal mechanisms but also through practices such as tracking students via their preferred name and pronoun. A wide range of ages is represented among both staff and students, and care is taken to account for this range in the planning of departmental activities. All staff have received anti-discrimination and implicit bias training and the Department is taking positive steps to promote greater racial diversity within the field.

Promotion and Career Progression

Our approach to equality and diversity goes beyond the minimal commitment to ensuring that no one is disadvantaged by virtue of protected characteristics or circumstances. We are instead concerned to foster research excellence through encouraging and promoting research leadership from a range of backgrounds and expertise. A key aspect of this strategy is proactive preparation for the institutional promotions process through the annual PDP. This identifies potential gaps in career profiles, and triggers steps to ensure colleagues are given opportunities to undertake additional responsibilities and roles to enhance their professional skills. Colleagues involved in staff recruitment or REF leadership are also required to undertake further specialist equality and diversity training by the institution.

Another priority in this REF cycle was to rectify a gender imbalance at professorial level. Therefore, we took full advantage of the University's investment in the Athena Swan award scheme, and encouraged members of the Department to participate in initiatives such as the Aurora Women's Leadership Training programme and the University women's professorial forum. Female members of the Department were particularly encouraged to apply for promotion with three successfully achieving the title of Associate Professor (**Bacon, Dossett, Vincent**). As a result, the number of women holding professorial titles has risen from one to four, more than half the number of Professors in the Department.

We take seriously our responsibility to support all colleagues with protected characteristics, and to address issues of under-representation. We are particularly mindful of the low representation of scholars who identify as BAME in TRS and are taking proactive steps to address this, including a curriculum review and series of workshops on race and decolonisation within the discipline. One sign of successful progress in TRS Chester is that five of the seven postdocs, and two members of staff appointed during this REF cycle, have identified as BAME. TRS staff have a diversity of family circumstances, at least one has a declared disability, and a number of members identify as LGBTQ, including several at Professorial level.

Wellbeing and Mental Health

There are formal processes in place across the institution for family leave, flexible working, and to support staff and PGR students who experience illness to return to work.

In a climate across the HE sector in which the mental health of students is regarded as a major concern, the Department has worked proactively to create a more sustainable working environment through promoting staff and student well-being. Self-catering facilities in Hollybank enable academic and administrative staff to meet regularly for daily morning coffee and to socialise at other times. This has a tangible impact on the maintenance of good communications within the Department, on the integration of new and part-time staff and PGR students into departmental culture, the encouragement of better working practices, and a spirit of collegiality.

Recognising the increasing number of postgraduate students whose progress is impacted by mental health difficulties, a number of staff have undertaken University-wide training in Mental Health First Aid in order to raise awareness and develop more effective support for staff and students. Supervisors and postgraduate tutors have been trained to be proactive in modelling practices of self-care, and advising students of their entitlement to suspend studies with no detriment.

Using a £5000 grant to build a new knowledge transfer pathway from the Higher Power Project, **Dossett** spearheaded an initiative to designate the University of Chester as a Recovery-Friendly Campus to promote greater sensitivity towards staff and students in recovery from addiction. In collaboration with the Home Office Recovery Champion and Public Health England, she ran a series of workshops and briefings across the institution as part of the University's Equality and Diversity Festival in February 2020.

Equality and Diversity Within Postgraduate Research

The Department's PGR recruitment strategy has sought to facilitate the participation of students from historically under-represented backgrounds. This has meant building up a model of provision that effectively supports a substantial cohort of mature, part-time students.

Our concern for diversity begins at the application and recruitment stage. All PGR interview panels must include at least one academic trained in equality and diversity procedures. The Department also organised training in unconscious bias for all its members. The typical application process encourages prospective students to develop research proposals in consultation with prospective supervisors, which permits staff to assess the capabilities of students whose prior record of achievement may have been constrained by circumstances beyond their control. One external examiner noted that the modular structure of the DProf programme, in particular, "means that the Department offers the possibility of study at this level to students who (perhaps for reasons of learning or career trajectories) might otherwise be excluded at admissions stage". We have supported students with declared disabilities, including the provision of BSL signers. **Evans's** work on the BSL Bible is also a significant contribution in this area.

Members of the Department play an active role in encouraging scholarly societies to be more attentive to issues of equality and diversity, and the importance of extending the research base. In his role as assistant secretary of the Society for the Study of Theology, for example, **Fulford** was instrumental in establishing its Bursary Scheme for BAME scholars.

3. Income, infrastructure and facilities

Since 2014, in response to our strategic review of research, we have overhauled our departmental infrastructure to better promote and enhance the sustainability of our research ambitions. This resulted in the establishment of RAG, the implementation of regular discussion of research plans at departmental Meetings and Away days, and the development of a more robust and ambitious approach to grant capture. This strategic deployment of resources, both human and financial, has enabled the Department to interact with wider University strategy and infrastructure more effectively, which undergirds our innovative research activity.

Infrastructure

Research in the Department is coordinated by RAG through the organisation of reading groups, oversight of research leave, and provision of training and information events at Department Meetings and Away Days.

The research activity of the Department is supported by a number of internal funding streams: in the first instance, the Department's staff development funding is ring-fenced to support individual members of staff in conference attendance and research related travel. This is supplemented by the Faculty through the provision of additional competitive research funding, from which members of TRS have secured £17,000 over the current cycle, and University level funds, which support international travel for research purposes; members of the Department have secured over £30,000 of this funding in the current cycle. The University's Research and Knowledge Transfer Office supports the writing and management of external funding bids.

The University's library holds over 300,000 volumes, and there has been substantial recent investment in the provision of electronic texts. TRS staff work closely with the library to ensure the currency of holdings. The University also holds membership of library and information services networks such as SCONUL, which greatly assists access to research materials for distance learning PGR students.

Other additional external collections/archives complement and enhance the main University collection. Gladstone's Library, situated 8 miles from Chester, is an affiliate library of the University. Its substantial historical archives and continuing acquisitions in the specialisms of theology, politics and history represent a considerable research resource. Its residential and study facilities are regularly used by the Department, for example DProf residential seminars and MA intensive study blocks. The Department also benefits from a close relationship with Chester Cathedral, enabling preferential access to its library holdings, including a substantial collection of 18th and 19th century bibles. These have been particularly valuable to members of staff with specific interests in reception history (**Collins, Middleton**).

Open Access

The University of Chester actively promotes an Open Access policy, and is committed to supporting its researchers in making outcomes of research freely and publicly available, recognising researchers' freedom to choose how and where to publish outputs. In order to increase the visibility and dissemination of its researchers, the University has a mandatory policy for research outputs, which requires that the bibliographic metadata for and the full text of all items accepted for publication after 1 September 2014 should be deposited in the Institution's Repository (ChesterRep). This ensures all research outputs are publicly available, subject to publishers' restrictions.

Facilities

Each academic in the Department has a private office in a building dedicated to the work of TRS (Hollybank), in which all teaching also takes place. The offices are reasonably large, equipped with computers and other IT equipment, and ample space for bookshelves. With three good sized lecture rooms, Hollybank is large enough to host medium-sized conferences, while the main University campus has facilities to support larger events. This utilisation of space supports a vibrant community of scholars engaged in an active research culture.

Visiting Lecturers have access to office space adjacent to Hollybank while PGR students have dedicated study space provided by the University. Department and University Virtual Learning Environment sites support research training and PGR student development. We have strong links with a highly supportive and well-resourced University Learning Information Service, which regularly records our research seminars and PG training sessions. These are then made publicly available on the University website. Since Covid-19, these events have been hosted online via the University's virtual meeting platform.

Income Strategy

Following analysis of the outcomes of REF2014, the Department identified increasing external research income as a major priority for the future. We determined to invest in an **open, transparent** and effective infrastructure that would support and generate excellent research in terms of **outputs, impact, and grant capture**. We quickly realised the process put in place for reviewing and supporting publication could also be effectively employed to provide support for grant bids at all stages, from inception to application. In addition, the Department allocated time in the workload of three fixed-term postdoctoral researchers to assist staff in pursuing external funding applications.

We also put in place a series of competitive internal seed funding schemes to enable colleagues to adopt a more strategic approach to bidding for externally funded projects. When potential projects have been identified, QR funding is invested to release colleagues from regular duties to work on projects with both **impact** and research **grant capture** potential at all stages of their development. Funds may also be invested in paying for external review. This has been driven by an explicit recognition of the long-term development of such projects as significant and valid activities for research-active staff, both during 'normal' periods of research time and as the basis of applications for regular study leave.

Our commitment to collegiality is demonstrated by substantial staff time investment in reading groups, which review drafts of bids on a regular basis. Our processes are responsive to different application procedures. For example, mock interviews are held where these are required by funding bodies. This process, particularly the mock interview, was particularly effective in supporting **Scharbrodt** in the preparation of his European Research Council application on transnational Shia Islam, for which he secured a grant of €1.9 million in 2017, prior to his appointment at Birmingham.

Further success of our process is demonstrated by **Clough's** £458K award from the AHRC for his Christian Ethics of Farmed Animal Welfare project. Several rounds of funding were allocated to him to develop the preparatory work, and then write the bid, in consultation with external mentoring and review. At the same time, TRS and Faculty provision of staff development funds was crucial in enabling **Clough** to attend international conferences which were instrumental in establishing networks that resulted in the funding success for the related impact project (CreatureKind, US\$749K).

Other substantial grants have been awarded to **Scharbrodt** (Gerda Henkel Foundation, £210K), **Vincent** (AHRC, £200K jointly with Manchester Metropolitan University; Templeton Religion Trust £163K) and **Tee** (Templeton Religion Trust, £151K). Members of the Department have also received smaller amounts from various funding bodies, including the Archbishops' Council/William Temple Foundation (**Morris**, £51K), Church Universities Fund (**Middleton**, £20K), Sir Halley Stewart Trust (**Dossett**, £26K), AHRC (**Baker**, £12K), US Farm Forward (**Clough**, £11K)

The overall success of our strategic focus on increasing external funding has been dramatic. In this REF cycle the Department's external grant capture has risen significantly from £160,000 in the previous REF cycle to more than £1.3 million in this REF cycle, not including **Scharbrodt's** €1.9 million grant, won while he was at Chester.

4. Collaboration and contribution to the research base, economy and society

Our strategy since 2014 has sought to create a research environment which encourages individual colleagues to enhance their professional reputations as subject experts and disciplinary leaders in order to increase the visibility and influence of the Department as a whole.

Evidence of the success of this strategy is measured in the number of colleagues who have assumed higher levels of responsibility and influence in scholarly societies, and undertaken other senior research roles. Overall, as a result of our investment in a **supportive** and **inclusive** research environment, there has been a dramatic increase not only in research **outputs** and **funding**, but also leadership of learned societies, editorships, keynote invitations, and a range of research-related public engagement.

Contribution to Discipline

A key element in the Department's research strategy is to encourage and celebrate the role individual researchers fulfil in national and international networks. Evidence of the growing prominence and seniority of TRS Chester, both individually and collectively, is our substantial contribution to the sustainability of the discipline through various forms of scholarly activity.

Leadership of Learned Societies

Since 2014, the increasing influence and reputation of TRS Chester has been reflected in the prominence of Chester scholars within leadership positions in national and international bodies, with full support and approval of the University. Chester TRS academics now occupy leadership positions in many scholarly societies. **Clough** was President of the Society for the Study of Christian Ethics (2014–18) and is due to become Vice President of the Society for the Study of Theology in April 2021, **Vincent** is currently President of the International Society for Religion, Literature and Culture (2018–present), **Middleton** is Secretary of the European Association of Biblical Studies (2018–present), and former Secretary of the British New Testament Society (2011–17), and **Fulford** is Assistant Secretary of the Society for the Study of Theology (2019–present). In addition, virtually all members of the Department serve in other leadership roles (committee members, conference steering committees, programme leadership) in scholarly societies, such as AAR, BASR, BIAPT, BNTS, BSA, EABS, SOTS, SOCRel, SBL, and SST. Chester also contributes significantly to the health of the discipline nationally; both **Dossett** and **Clough** have served on the TRS-UK executive board, and **Graham** is a patron of the same organisation.

Engagement with other HEIs

Chester TRS research expertise is in demand both nationally and internationally. Members of the Department have given more than 80 invited lectures and seminar papers across North America, Europe, Australia/New Zealand, and Asia, including: Oxford, Cambridge, Manchester, Edinburgh, St Andrews, Durham, Harvard Law School, Princeton Theological Seminary, Hong Kong Chinese University, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Uppsala University, and in 2019–20 **Clough** undertook a substantial lecture tour of North America and Australia.

Chester academics are active in various forms of external research assessment. Senior colleagues have acted as external reviewers for Professorial appointments for institutions such as: Aberdeen, Birmingham, Exeter, Protestant Theological University Groningen (Netherlands), Richmond University (USA), and National Research Foundation (South Africa). TRS staff serve as reviewers for a number of funding bodies, such as the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland, Leverhulme, the British Academy, the National Science Centre (Poland), Swiss National Science Foundation, and the Israel Science Foundation. Staff have also been singled out for honours such as visiting fellowships at the University of Ghent (**Llewellyn**), Centre of Theological Inquiry, Princeton (**Middleton**), and Goethe University, Frankfurt (**Vincent**).

Members of the Department have examined over 40 doctorates at institutions such as Aberdeen, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Glasgow, King's College London, London School of Economics, Manchester, Nottingham, Åbo University (Finland), Leiden University (Netherlands), Lutheran School of Theology (Chicago), and University of Oslo (Norway), and have served as external

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examiners for postgraduate programmes at Glasgow, Queen's University Belfast, Aberdeen, University of Wales Trinity St David, and Durham.

Editorships and Commissioning

Chester TRS Staff take leading roles in shaping research in their respective fields through editorial and commissioning responsibilities for journals, including *Studies in Christian Ethics* (**Clough**), *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* (**Dossett**), *International Journal of Practical Theology* (**Graham**), *Practical Theology* (**Morris**), *Jewish Culture & History* and *Literature & Theology* (**Vincent**, Reviews), and book series such as Scriptural Traces (Bloomsbury/T&T Clark; **Collins**); Theology in Practice (Brill; **Graham**); and Bloomsbury Series in Religion, Gender & Sexuality (**Llewellyn**). Members also serve on editorial boards for book series and journals such as 'The Bible and Critical Theory' (**Middleton**, Wipf and Stock), 'Studies in Ancient Religion and Culture' (**Middleton**, Equinox), 'Philosophy and Religion' (**Vincent**, Brill), *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience* (**Dossett**), *International Journal of Public Theology* (**Graham**), *Journal for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies* (**Llewellyn, Vincent**), *Sociology of Islam* (**Tee**), and the *Journal for the Study of Interreligious Relations* (**Vincent**).

Chester's reputation as an acknowledged centre of excellence in research is demonstrated by the number of conferences and professional meetings which it has hosted in this REF cycle, as well as by its appeal to international scholars as a destination for sabbaticals and study leave. Chester has hosted over 10 conferences and symposia, including the annual meetings of British Association for the Study of Religion, The Bible, Critical Theory and Reception Seminar, and the British New Testament Society. The International Society for Religion, Literature and Culture was scheduled for September 2020 but postponed due to Covid-19.

In addition, Chester staff are in high demand as speakers, delivering over 80 keynotes and invited lectures, including the Edward Bailey Annual Memorial Lecture (**Llewellyn**); Association of Practical Theology in Oceania (**Graham**); Nordic Committee on Bioethics (**Clough**); University of Wales Trinity St David Interfaith Symposium (**Dossett, Morris, Vincent**); Annual Karl Barth Conference, Princeton Centre for Barth Studies (**Clough**); British Sociological Association SocRel (**Llewellyn**); Didsbury Lectures (**Graham**); Finnish Association of Death Studies (**Middleton**); Welsh Government Living Room Annual Lecture (**Dossett**); Faces and Voices of Recovery Annual Conference (**Dossett**); and Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre Annual Lecture (**Dossett**).

Contribution to Wider Society

Embedded within the Chester TRS research strategy is a strong commitment to engage with external stakeholders and wider society, which is credited through workload planning. Financial support for these activities is made available through staff development funding, as well as competitive Faculty and University Knowledge Transfer funding. In particular we have cultivated collaborative relationships with media, faith communities, and schools as a natural outworking of and stimulus for our research activity.

Media

The Department encourages members to promote their research expertise more widely through engagement with the media. It supports this by periodic media training, provided either by University staff or external consultants. Chester TRS staff contribute regularly to the public understanding of religion through participation in, for example: BBC Television and Radio (Songs of Praise, Beyond Belief, Sunday Sequence), Premier Christian Radio, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Voice of Islam, and Al Jazeera. We are also an expert resource for journalists in both national and local print media, such as The Guardian, the Church Times, US Catholic Herald, and the Chester Chronicle. Social media also plays a key role in promoting staff research: in addition to individual staff social media profiles, activities such as publications, public lectures, and interventions in ongoing debates are routinely aggregated and disseminated through the Department Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook pages.

The Department's media engagement strategy is aimed at making significant interventions in debate and agenda-setting. For example, **Graham**'s research on the Sea of Faith archive at Gladstone's

Unit-level environment template (REF5b)

Library fuelled interest from a radio producer in the work of Don Cupitt, resulting in a BBC Radio 4 programme broadcast in March 2019. Similarly, **Llewellyn**'s work with Chester Storyhouse has produced a steady stream of local events which have centred on questions of religion and women's agency.

Faith Communities

The University of Chester has an Anglican Foundation, which is reflected in the Department's approach to community engagement. Several TRS staff (**Clough, Evans, Fulford, Graham, Middleton, Vincent**) have undertaken collaborative initiatives with local, national and international faith constituencies (Church of Scotland, Methodist Church, Church of England, Council for Christians and Jews, Limmud). These have led to sustained and tangible outcomes in the form of educational events, publications and policy initiatives, such as **Middleton**'s Church University funded Sexuality and Anglican Identities Project, in partnership with Chester Cathedral; and **Clough**'s CreatureKind Initiative, which seeks to encourage Christian organisations to adopt policies advocating sustainable farming and default vegetarianism at local, regional, and national levels.

Similarly, **Graham**'s appointment in 2014 as Canon Theologian of Chester Cathedral provided a forum for her to communicate her research specialisms—including laity development, ecclesiology, apologetics and public theology—to a popular audience. Her 2015 lecture, 'Whatever Happened to the Laity?' was instrumental in her appointment to the national Archbishops' Task Group on Lay Leadership (2016–17), and was subsequently published in *Ecclesiology* (2017). Her research comprehensively informed the Group's report, *Setting God's People Free* (2017), and was followed by a number of speaking engagements around the country, including a conference at Lambeth Palace, to help advance the Church of England's continuing work in lay discipleship.

Schools

A key aspect of the Unit's involvement with organisations and institutions beyond higher education has been its success in putting specific research expertise at the disposal of external groups either through consultancy, membership of working parties or in-service training. A particularly noteworthy aspect of this has been our engagement with schools. Research expertise within TRS informs the school curriculum and enables members of the Department to exercise direct influence on other sectors of education. **Llewellyn**'s consultancy work on the BBC 'Bitesize' Religious Studies series was instrumental in ensuring the currency and accuracy of their learning resource across all key stages. **Middleton** served on the HE Advisory Group for the Welsh Exam Board's revision of their A-Level and GCSE syllabus for Religious Studies, while **Dossett** provided key evidence to the national Commission on Religious Education's report "Religion and Worldviews: the way forward". **Vincent** currently serves as a representative on the West Cheshire Standing Acting Council for Religious Education. Department members continue to provide RE training and resources for school students and teachers in areas such as A-level study days, CPD for teachers, level 7 stand-alone modules, and the popular 'Christian Controversies' conference hosted annually by Chester Cathedral.

These relationships enabled us to make a distinctive and significant contribution to A-Level teaching during the COVID-19 lockdown. We rapidly addressed the disruption to students' studies by providing a series of live webinars featuring members of the Department. These were enthusiastically received by teachers and pupils alike, and have been viewed more than 3,500 times.

Culture of Collaboration and Interdisciplinary Research

The Department actively supports its members in interdisciplinary research. Colleagues have taken leadership roles or participated in interdisciplinary research projects such as *Gothic Heresy: Investigating Religious Experience and Religious Knowledge in Contemporary Horror* (**Vincent**), and in University interdisciplinary centres, such as the Institute for Gender Studies (**Bacon, Graham, Vincent**), of which **Llewellyn** was the founding Associate Director. Others have worked across institutions, in projects such as the *British Ritual Innovation under Covid-19* project run in collaboration with Performance Studies at Manchester Metropolitan (**Vincent**), or the *Bible and World War I* project organised with representatives from Biblical Studies and History from Chester,

Unit-level environment template (REF5b)

Cambridge, and Munich (**Collins, Vincent**), and the Finnish Association of Death Studies (**Middleton**).

In conjunction with Gladstone's Library, TRS offers an annual Gladstone Research Fellowship which provides a three-month term of access to archive collections and departmental research facilities. Preference is given to visiting scholars whose research expertise complements those of the Department in order to promote further collaborative networking. Our departmental culture encourages the establishment of both national and international collaborative links, and in addition to TRS Chester staff's international activity discussed above, we have also hosted international scholars from Norway, Malta, Turkey, Kenya, Canada, Sweden, the United States, and Australia, greatly enriching and sustaining our already vibrant research environment.