

THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND

EVALUATION

April 2011

A report commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture

Part I – General Outline	3
I. Introduction.....	4
I.1. The Expert Panel	4
I.2. Terms of Reference.....	4
I.3. Working Method.....	4
I.4. Short Evaluation of the Work Process	5
Part II – Report.....	7
II.1. University of Iceland	8
II.1.a. Role and Objectives	8
II.1.b. Administration and Organisation	12
II.1.c. Structure of Teaching and Research	13
II.1.d. Competence Requirements of Personnel.....	17
II.1.e. Rules Regarding Admission Requirements and Rights and Duties of Students	17
II.1.f. Facilities and Services Provided to Teachers and Students.....	18
II.1.g. Internal Quality Management System.....	19
II.1.h. Description of Learning Outcomes.....	20
II.1.i. Finances	21
Part III – General Findings and Recommendation	24
III.1. Summary of Findings.....	25
III.2. Recommendations.....	26
III.3. Signatures of the Expert Committee.....	29
Appendix I. Agenda of Site Visit to University of Iceland 7 January 2011.	31
Appendix II. Documents Received.....	33

Part I - General Outline

I. Introduction

I.1. The Expert Panel

- Prof. Dr. Ronald A. Piper, Vice-Principal, University of St Andrews, Scotland (chair)
- Prof. Dr. phil. Carsten Riis, Dean, University of Aarhus, Denmark
- Dr. Eiríkur Stephensen, the Icelandic Centre for Research (RANNIS), Liaison Officer

I.2. Terms of Reference

The Expert Panel is appointed according to Article 8 of Rules No. 321/2009 on Quality Control of Teaching and Research in Higher Education Institutions. The Committee is to base its reference on the components of Article 4 of the same act. They are:

- a) role and objectives,
- b) administration and organisation,
- c) structure of teaching and research,
- d) competence requirements of personnel,
- e) rules regarding admission requirements and rights and duties of students,
- f) facilities and services provided to teachers and students,
- g) internal quality management system,
- h) description of learning outcomes,
- i) finances.

I.3. Working Method

The Expert Panel received a *Evaluation of Instruction and Study in the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies - Self-Evaluation Report* and further documentation in December 2010 by email (see Appendix II).

The Expert Panel met on 6 January 2011 for a first discussion about the exercise and then made a site visit to University of Iceland on 7 January during which it had the opportunity to discuss with management, faculty, students and external representatives and look at facilities (see agenda in Appendix I).

A report was then drafted after the Iceland visit and circulated amongst Expert Panel members by email correspondence. The descriptive parts of the final version (Part II – Report) were sent to the University of Iceland for a check of factual errors and misinterpretations on 21 February 2011. The Expert Panel received some factual corrections on 4 March 2011 and revised the report accordingly.

I.4. Short Evaluation of the Work Process

a. Self-Evaluation Report

All data, learning outcomes, and information on study programmes and courses that were provided in the Appendices of the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) were in Icelandic. This greatly hampered the Review. When on-the-spot translation was provided by the RANNÍS support officer of some of the data, it became apparent that the accuracy and interpretation of the statistics required much closer investigation.

The organisation of the SER could be improved to align better with the nine key components of the Review report. As a result information on some points required for the Review was thin or absent from the SER.

The SER displayed careful reflection and honest concerns at many points, and this openness was helpful to the Reviewers.

It would have been helpful if there was an expectation that the SER had more appended information about individual staff research activity, research grant income, course packs showing what is actually taught and read for courses, sample assessments, lists of thesis topics, and information about the quality of theses (such as external examiner reports). An alternative to providing this as an attachment to the SER would be providing this material during the site visit (if the visit were extended in duration to provide time to peruse this material). It is impossible to make independent judgements about the quality of teaching or research in the absence of any primary or secondary evidence about quality.

b. Site Visit to follow up specific issues on 6-7 January 2011

Information about the site visit was not provided in advance of the visit itself. This meant that the Reviewers had no opportunity in advance to ask about the range of students or stakeholders that were being interviewed (both of which were concerns on the day).

Concern about the lack of supporting documentation has been noted above (with regard to the SER). An alternative approach is to provide supporting documentation for

viewing during the site visit. It would have been impossible to do so, however, in a site visit that lasted a single day. Given the range of topics that the Review is intended to cover, it is recommended that no fewer than two full days be devoted to site visits in the future.

The Reviewers appreciated the careful organisation of the interviews (with some qualification regarding the choice of students and stakeholders, which had a strong emphasis on a single constituency), the support provided by RANNÍS and the time made available by members of the Faculty, School and University.

Part II - Report

II.1. University of Iceland

II.1.a. Role and Objectives

- During its long history, the Faculty of Theology & Religious Studies (hereafter “the Faculty”) has contributed in a substantial way to the academic study of theology in Iceland and further afield. The staff that met the Reviewers were dedicated, and they appear to enjoy academic respect at the University of Iceland. The Faculty has a clear ambition to meet the standards of the international academic community.
- Several tensions would appear to exist, however, in the current explanation of the role and objectives of the Faculty. These are discussed in more detail below. Any confusion over role and objectives is a particular concern for a small Faculty, which has limited prospects for attracting more resources, because there is a danger of spreading overburdened resources ever more thinly.
- Religious Studies. At the date of the Self-Evaluation Report (March 2010; hereafter “the SER”), the Faculty seemed to have made a decision to expand its programmes in Religious Studies. This would have (i) met the desires of the School of Humanities (hereafter “the School”) and University to have more opportunities for cross-disciplinary work within the School and University, (ii) met the desires of the School and University to be protected from criticism that the University programme was giving unwarranted privilege to one religious belief system (Christianity), (iii) created the possibility of widening the base of student applicants, and (iv) met some of the needs of students intending to enter ministry or teaching to be better prepared for engagement with society at large.

At the time of the site visit, however, notification was given that a major initiative in this direction had been stopped. Only a modest course offering in Religious Studies would exist—not a full new degree programme.

It is arguable that this was inevitable in view of the current staffing structure. The staff resources to teach a full programme in Religious Studies did not appear to exist. For its part the School did seem to recognise that some new investment in staff might be needed to make the Religious Studies programme possible, but contributions from staff elsewhere in the School would also have been a potential resource.

The Reviewers were therefore left in considerable uncertainty about the future intentions of the Faculty, School and University. The School and University seemed still to want to see Religious Studies developed; the Faculty seemed to have retreated to a one-year programme (from a two-year programme in 2008 to 2010) for financial reasons. A consistent message is that a major change would be required in order to implement a proper programme in Religious Studies. (See recommendations below.)

- Pastoral Preparation. In terms of the Faculty's (primary traditional) mission of preparing students for ministries in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland (hereafter "the Church"), the pastoral element in such preparation has been a point of focus in recent strategic planning. The Faculty seems to desire to focus professional preparation for ministry more in the context of a new professional two-year Masters qualification (the *mag.theol.*) rather than the three-year undergraduate BA programme. The courses of the BA programme are of course prerequisite for the Master programme and include some pastoral theology. Nevertheless, this separation seems part of a strategy to (i) give the undergraduate programme wider appeal, (ii) provide a better distinction between the Masters qualification and the Bachelors qualification than currently exists (at least for students for ministry), and (iii) devote more time and focus to the pastoral element for ministry students through a distinct two-year programme that would include both theoretical and practical approaches to ministerial preparation. Because the Faculty appears to believe that theoretical and practical approaches should be done in concert, it wishes to maintain primary responsibility for the programme.

On the other hand, interviewed representatives of the Church expressed some criticisms of the Faculty's pastoral preparation with respect to (i) its rather staid traditional nature that failed to engage newer models of ministry and newer ways in which the Church is active in society, and (ii) the poor preparation of deacons. The Church representatives did not wholly reject the view that there might be some advantages for the pastoral preparation taking place largely outside the Faculty and at the hands of the Church. The Church does already have a significant responsibility for pastoral training.

For their part, the interviewed students (the selection of whom was strongly oriented to preparing for ministry) seemed to want more opportunities for direct engagement with the Church during their BA programme. Such engagement was seen to offer “real” hands-on opportunities and a potentially fruitful contact with their future employer.

This composite of views suggests that the Faculty’s plans for the *mag. theol.* programme run the danger of satisfying neither their students nor their external (Church) stakeholders. Moreover, the Faculty’s commitment to the provision of pastoral preparation raises again the question of the Faculty’s future direction (see above) and whether the Faculty is concentrating upon its strengths, which may lie more in the academic arena.

- Doctoral Programme. The importance placed upon research for all disciplines in the University tends to mean that research programmes (and in particular, doctoral programmes) are important for a discipline’s academic credibility. There are, however, substantial problems with such an expectation in the case of the Faculty, as representatives of the Faculty recognised. These include (i) the small number of doctoral students in the Faculty currently and in the past, (ii) the desirability of Icelandic academics doing doctoral studies abroad so that their entire academic careers are not within a single University Faculty, (iii) the lack of any real programme—including a research seminar programme—for doctoral students in the Faculty, (iv) the restricted choice of supervisors in view of the Faculty often having only one professor in each of the six/seven main sub-disciplines of the Faculty (defined in SER, p. 7), and (v) the limited interest in attracting overseas doctoral students because of the absence of international student fees. Despite these concerns, the Faculty seems unclear whether its strategy should be to build its doctoral ‘programme’ or abandon it.
- Internationalisation. The Faculty’s staff are certainly aware of the benefits of international collaboration. There is good evidence of staff involvement in research projects that extend beyond Iceland. There is also some international movement of students. But it is less clear what priority internationalisation has within the Faculty’s strategy. The Faculty seemed very aware of its equally important (but inevitably competing) duty to be a resource for Iceland, the history of which is not far removed from the history of its religious institutions

and religious ideas. As a result, much attention has focused upon publishing an Icelandic journal (*Studia Theologica Islandica*). Such a spread of energies between the two laudable aims of making a mark *as a Faculty* on the international stage and serving the interests of Iceland is not easily accomplished in a small Faculty that tries to do everything.

- Critical Mass. It would be unfair to criticise a small Faculty for being small. But a small Faculty faces particular challenges if it is to have significant impact. A small Faculty may require a conscious use of strategies designed to maximise impact, and it may require some difficult decisions about where such impact can be realistically achieved. Because the Faculty is currently constructed around a traditional teaching programme of some half-dozen sub-disciplines, with roughly one professor per sub-discipline, the Faculty's expertise is highly dispersed. The Faculty does not seem to have a conscious strategy to counter the negative effects of such a fragmentation of interests. International research collaborations are praised in the SER and are to be welcomed, but they were not presented in such a way so as to suggest that there was a coherent plan in how such collaborations were chosen. The School seems to see opportunities in cross-disciplinary research and teaching with staff in other Faculties, but it is again difficult to see a clear strategy for maximising such potential opportunities.
- Summary. As a general observation, the Faculty has spread itself thinly in terms of its activities and ambitions for the future (note the SER, pp. 9-10 and 21). Resources are unlikely to increase significantly for the Faculty, despite the possibility of some investment by the School in Religious Studies. The Faculty has therefore some major decisions to take about its future if it is not to be further weakened by maintaining disparate foci. Responsibility seems to fall particularly to the Faculty for such thinking, because it would appear that decisions about strategic direction are largely devolved from both the University and School administration to the Faculty.

II.1.b. Administration and Organisation

- The size of the Faculty does not require an extensive organisational structure. There is a Head of Faculty, a Vice-Head of Faculty and (within the School) an Operational Manager.
- Students have contact largely with the School office for administrative arrangements. There are clear advantages of this School administrative pooling in terms of resources and consistency.
- Unusually, the location of the offices of the Faculty staff is in near proximity to the School offices. This may be advantageous administratively for the Faculty, but it is at the cost of a separation from the staff of the other Faculties in the School.
- It should be noted that the current Head of Faculty was not part of the team that produced the Self-Evaluation Report.
- The School appeared to be pleased with the organisation and administration of the Faculty, and particularly with its active engagement with the new School structure.
- It was less clear how the Faculty or indeed the School reviews staff performance with regard to teaching and research. Formal and clearly identified processes and structures would exist for this at many universities. While it would appear that formal processes do apply in relation to promotion, the majority of staff in the Faculty are already fully-promoted and so this is unlikely to be an effective means of performance evaluation or management.
- School Teaching Committee. Whilst (i) the existence of this School Committee is noted in the SER, (ii) reference is made in the SER (p. 20) to a problem with course feedback being referred to this Committee and (iii) there appears to be student representation on this Committee, no evidence was presented that would allow its effectiveness to be judged in relation to the School addressing teaching problems in the Faculty. Indeed, it would appear that the new University Information Gateway will for the first time allow academic managers to view the student feedback for their teaching staff and courses. It remains to be seen what authority the Head of Faculty or the School Teaching Committee will have to address problems identified by this means.

- Institute of Theology. This is extensively highlighted in the SER, and several research initiatives operate under its aegis. As a means of promoting and organising the diverse research and outwardly-directed activities of the Faculty, it would seem entirely appropriate. Admissions and administration for graduate study programmes are also handled under the aegis of the Institute. In view of the small numbers of doctoral students, there might be some advantages of doctoral programmes being administered at School level, especially with regard to oversight of progress of doctoral students.
- Summary. Whilst little evidence was presented of administrative problems, and students seemed to be well served by the School offices, there was a general impression that structures which could effectively deal with problems of teaching or evaluation of research (at either Faculty or School level) were not evident. The overall impression was that such issues, if addressed at all, were addressed very informally.

II.1.c. Structure of Teaching and Research

a. Teaching

Very little material regarding teaching programmes and requirements was provided for the Review in English.

- The structure of the Faculty's teaching programmes was in the midst of change, as the Faculty decided to cut back its Religious Studies programme to a single year (at least for the foreseeable future), make its three-year undergraduate BA programme more broadly based (with no practical training), and create a new two-year Masters programme for pastoral professional development (the *mag.theol.*).
- Undergraduate BA Programme.
 - Whilst pastoral training is no longer associated with this programme, it would appear that the the BA programme is still largely organised around the need for ministry candidates to have basic academic instruction in each of the traditional sub-disciplines of Theology (including pastoral theology). It is unclear, therefore, whether this will broaden the appeal of the programme, which is viewed by the Faculty as essential in order to

increase student numbers (and, correspondingly, financial viability). Whether this rather traditional structure will adequately meet the different needs of the specified three target groups (SER, p. 15) is also uncertain.

- Restricting the number of electives within the undergraduate programme (SER p. 16) is probably necessary in terms of staff resources, but may be counterproductive in terms of making the programme more attractive to students in view of the normal student attraction to “tailor-made” programmes.
- Such a restriction of courses might be overcome by the opportunity for students to take more courses outside the Faculty. (Church candidates might have their range of electives limited by church requirements, but this need not apply to all students). Whilst there is a cost in terms of loss of income to the Faculty when students take “outside” courses, this might be compensated for if the programme as a whole attracts more students.
- Some efforts have been made to attract students into Faculty courses from other School programmes. There was some interest, but no apparent plan, to develop this further.
- It is not entirely clear from the programme described on p. 14 in the SER that matters of progression of learning are always uppermost in the scheduling of classes. For example, why should a course on “Methodology in academic study” be a second (Spring) term course rather than a first (Autumn) term course?
- Interviewed students drew attention to the unevenness in the workload of different courses. Some courses were not sufficiently demanding; others were considered unreasonably heavy in workload. Students were not persuaded that mechanisms existed that might offer any change to this situation.
- There was little evidence presented regarding innovation in teaching methodology.
- Mag.Theol. Programme. The differing expectations amongst staff, students and stakeholders regarding the provision of the professional preparation for ministry

have been discussed above, including the concern voiced by some Church representatives about the dated nature of the curriculum.

- M.A. (Academic) Programme. The Faculty has retained the MA programme for students wishing to continue to develop academic interests, possibly leading to doctoral studies. The impression was given, however, that there was a significant overlap in the BA and MA courses. It was also not clear to what extent formal teaching was provided for MA students (except possibly in practical disciplines), and therefore to what extent the MA programme could be fairly considered a distinctive programme in its own right. This programme appears to lack distinctive character, and an apparently heavy reliance upon independent study warrants investigation in order to be assured of the quality of the learning experience.
- Doctoral Programme. See II.1.a above regarding the serious concerns about the provision for doctoral students.

b. Research

Very little material regarding research outputs of individual staff was provided for the Review, although this appears not to have been a requirement.

- Staffing in the Faculty has resulted in a situation where (in large part) single scholars represent the various sub-disciplines of the Faculty. This has an effect on the nature of research for the Faculty as a whole, which inevitably will have disparate foci.
- One strategy to counter a lone-scholar culture in research has been the creation of the Institute of Theology and an interest in collaborations outside the Faculty. The sheer number of projects under the umbrella of the Institute, however, gives the impression of a further fragmentation of efforts. Perhaps it is inevitable that the Institute will not be able to provide an integrated Faculty programme of research, but will promote various initiatives that often involve other contributors. The Faculty would benefit, though, from some internationally recognised areas of research strength, around which some critical mass and an international reputation can be built.

- It would appear that a research seminar programme has not operated within the Faculty. The introduction of such a programme would greatly benefit doctoral students (if this programme is to continue).
- There is a challenge posed by the twin, albeit legitimate, goals of directing research efforts at serving Icelandic society (through the Icelandic theological journal and producing textbooks in Icelandic, which unfortunately may not be read much outside Iceland) and having an impact on the international stage with publication in main languages such as English. As noted previously, the attempt to try to do both can spread energies thinly and thus runs the risk of weakening the impact of the Faculty.
- The regular monitoring and review of staff research performance for this Faculty would appear to be largely based on the University's internal system of "research points". The precise purpose of these points was not made very clear, but no evidence was presented to suggest that these are used for the formal evaluation of individual performance. The award of research points appears to be based largely on the number of publications and kind of publications, rather than a peer assessment of quality of publications. In the recent past there have been strong fluctuations in the research points achieved collectively by the Faculty, which again makes it difficult to assess performance. For its part, the School appears not to be concerned about the quality or quantity of the Faculty's research performance, but the grounds for such a judgement seemed to be evidence of some recent publications of significance rather than reference to a robust mechanism for evaluating research planning and individual performance. For its part, the Faculty appears content to leave the issue of the evaluation of research performance to the University.
- The University drew attention to the importance of recruitment and promotion criteria in setting standards for research performance, but this would seem to have limited impact on a Faculty where most staff are fully promoted.
- No clear expectations were expressed in the Faculty or School about the level of research grant applications or income that should be achieved by the Faculty.
- In the SER (pp. 9 and 11), the Faculty has highlighted the need to improve its research library provision and research facilities.

- Summary. Academic staff are always torn between their research, teaching and administrative responsibilities. Whilst it would appear that staff in the Faculty take research seriously, and many interesting initiatives have been launched under the Institute, the Faculty struggles to find foci around which to develop an international profile for excellence. International efforts at collaboration will inevitably compete with national objectives. Formal mechanisms for regularly monitoring and assessing research performance of individual staff appear to be limited, but this may not be an issue for the Faculty alone.

II.1.d. Competence Requirements of Personnel

- Most staff in the Faculty hold doctorates from universities outside Iceland. This contributes significantly to the intellectual milieu.
- Research performance does appear to be a significant factor in the initial recruitment of staff. It is also a significant feature in promotion procedures.
- Regular assessments of performance in teaching and research appear to be less robust, as noted in II.1.c above.
- Little evidence was presented regarding initiatives for staff development.
- The use of student evaluation data by the Head of Faculty in reviewing staff teaching performance appears to be at an early stage. Students expressed some frustration at staff not responding to particular concerns about workload, although in general they were very pleased with their courses and teachers.
- Pastors who provide practical training for students are chosen by the Church and not by the Faculty.

II.1.e. Rules Regarding Admission Requirements and Rights and Duties of Students

- It is clear that the Faculty needs to increase the number of students. It was not made clear, however, what standards were required for Faculty admission beyond the requirement for a matriculation certificate.

- There appears to be a high percentage of older students in the Faculty. It was not made clear, however, whether special criteria are applied to admission of such students.
- It was noted (but the statistics in the Appendices were in Icelandic) that many students engaged in studies on a part-time basis. Accordingly their studies could extend over many years. The impression was given that there was concern about drop-out rates.
- No evidence was presented regarding the rights and duties of students, but considerable analysis was presented (in Icelandic) regarding employment destinations, which appear to be quite diverse.
- Many students appear to entertain the hope of entering ministry in the Church, even though only a modest number of positions for new clergy will be available in the Church (estimated to be 28 over 10 years).
- The suitability of doctoral and MA students appears to be judged by the Graduate Study Committee on the basis of previous performance in higher education.
- With regard to student rights or expectations, little evidence was presented for staff commitments to feedback on assessments (although it appears most staff were approachable and willing to provide feedback orally upon request), or expected workload per credit, or expectations about outside reading, or expectations regarding access to learning materials (the availability of teaching texts being a particular student concern).
- The small number of doctoral students expressed particular concerns about provisions made for them and their expectations.

II.1.f. Facilities and Services Provided to Teachers and Students

- Even though the University Library is closely aligned with the National Library, concerns were expressed by staff (in the SER, pp. 6 and 16) regarding research library resources and by students (in interview) about availability of student texts. Students noted that different staff practices could have helped to mitigate the limited availability of textbooks simply by proactive use of short loan for popular texts.

- Doctoral students indicated that they only recently obtained desk/study facilities for their use, after an initiative on their part.
- Undergraduate students appear to be largely left to their own initiative to find study/learning facilities. The Faculty is located in a separate building from other Faculties in the School (and is very committed to that separate location), but this location offers no identifiable student study space.
- The University Information Gateway (UGLA) is an impressive communication and course management tool. It apparently links to Moodle as a VLE. It is unclear how far pedagogical use is made of IT by the Faculty, but students do appear to use it for course feedback, etc. Similarly, attention is drawn in the SER (p. 23) to initiatives in continuing education in pastoral care, but it is not clear how far IT-facilitated distance learning is part of this initiative.
- The SER notes interest in developing an information web project on religious movements in Iceland (pp. 10-12).
- The Faculty draws attention to the problem of money available for staff travel (p. 16). Such scholarly interaction is particularly necessary for universities that are geographically isolated from the main European and North American centres of learning. The use of IT for conference communications was not highlighted.

II.1.g. Internal Quality Management System

- In the SER, the Faculty notes that the University's quality management (for teaching) is based on three major premises: (i) applicable Acts and Rules set for the University by Government, (ii) internationally recognised benchmarks and requirements (such as associated with the Bologna Process), and (iii) the strategy and objectives of the University of Iceland. With regard to the last of these, it was noted that on the day of the site visit the University had launched a new Strategy in which the management of teaching quality is said to have featured strongly. It would also appear that efforts are being made at national level to strengthen oversight of teaching quality in universities. These new initiatives are to be welcomed, but little detail was available about these new strategies or processes.

- The University has a unit devoted to the promotion of quality in teaching and learning. Not much detail was provided on the support it offered, or to what extent (if any) it conducted internal audits of teaching quality.
- The student course questionnaires, now managed via UGLA, provides a potentially rich source of feedback to those responsible for managing teaching quality.
- There is student representation on the School Teaching Committee, which provides another forum for student views to be expressed. The precise role or effectiveness of the School Teaching Committee in the management of the quality of teaching in the Faculty was unclear.
- There was no evidence presented regarding peer review of teaching by staff, other than for junior lecturers.
- Interviewed students expressed the view that most staff were responsive to student views and concerns, but there was at least one identifiable member of staff who was not (for whom there appeared no hope of any change).
- Students seemed satisfied with the quality of teaching and with staff feedback on their assessed work, especially when such feedback was requested. Unevenness of workload appeared to be the dominant concern, both in terms of courses that were too demanding and those that were not sufficiently demanding.
- As noted previously, the Church expressed concerns about the quality of diaconate preparation and about the current relevance of some models of ministry that were promulgated. It would appear that the Faculty had been made aware of these concerns, but it was not clear how they were being addressed.
- Issues regarding the management of research quality are noted in II.1.c above.

II.1.h. Description of Learning Outcomes

- A description of learning outcomes was apparently provided in Appendix 4, but the Reviewers would have required an English translation to investigate these more closely. (The Faculty has indicated that this is a matter for the Ministry.) The learning outcomes are apparently also available in Icelandic on the University website.

- In interview, students were very confident about their knowledge of learning outcomes from the outset of their courses.
- In interview, students were also very confident that, when viewed from the end of the course, the learning outcomes matched well what had actually been delivered.
- It was unclear in the literature that had been made available to the Review how far the learning outcomes of courses mapped collectively onto the learning outcomes for the programme as a whole.

II.1.i. Finances

- The financial viability and sustainability of the Faculty is clearly a serious concern to both the Faculty and the University. The SER (p. 22) draws attention, rightly, to the financial predicament of the Faculty when it notes: “The perennial financial difficulties have been a major obstacle to all progress in the faculty and have acted as a deterrent to its efforts”.
- Because of the funding model that operates, this concern focuses mostly upon student numbers. The difficulty that the Faculty has experienced in increasing its student numbers is in part what has driven the fresh look at its programmes. The Faculty faces that dilemma that much of its current programme is devised around the traditional sub-disciplines required for ministry in the Church. This is also reflected in the profile of its staffing. Yet the needs of the Church are not and will not be sufficient to support the number of students that the Faculty needs to be sustainable. Thus it is aware of the need to broaden the appeal of its undergraduate programme in the hope that this may attract more student numbers, but this is clearly challenging. The programmes cannot easily be changed without running the dangers of either failing to meet the Church’s expectations or increasing the demands upon already seriously stretched staff. The staff cannot easily be enlarged so as to bring in new expertise (such as in Religious Studies). More use of courses from other parts of the School could be introduced, but this can be viewed by the Faculty as a financial disadvantage. The most recent “hard decision” that was made was to reduce its Religious Studies undergraduate programme, and to try to find some other ways to broaden

appeal to students. For its part, the Church expressed the view that the efforts to broaden the Faculty's appeal were in part what was responsible for its predicament—an abandonment of its traditional focus. It is difficult to escape the view that the Faculty has more difficult decisions ahead. Despite these difficulties, the Faculty does appear to have the moral support of the University and the School, even if there is a marked reluctance of either to influence the strategy of the Faculty too greatly. Such reluctance would not be found in all universities.

- The attraction of students from other Faculties/programmes to courses offered by the Faculty of Theology & Religious Studies has proven a significant source of income on occasion—when a special course has been offered that has had wide appeal. The University distribution of financial resource does appear to allow the Faculty to benefit from teaching students in other programmes. Development of these opportunities—not only by one-off courses of high popularity but also by regular course offerings that might be part of interdisciplinary or joint-degree programmes—offers potential for increasing income if this has the strong support of the School. It would serve to reinforce the place of the Faculty within the broader academic ethos of the School and University. The SER (p. 23) indicates, however, that (rather strangely) collective bargaining contracts may represent an obstacle to be overcome for cross-disciplinary research and teaching.
- No significant income is derived from international students, so the Faculty has few incentives to develop this market and tap the potential for increased student numbers from outside Iceland.
- It was unclear how far research performance provides another important source of internal funding. If research points are linked to funding, the strong fluctuations in research points from year to year for the Faculty would make this problematic as part of a strategy for sustainability.
- Research grants could be a clear source of research-derived income, but within Iceland these appear to be limited for the subject area of theology. Collaborations with other universities where such funding is more available offer a possible means to increase performance in this area, but it is unlikely to be a major revenue source.

- Reduction of expenditure has been achieved in part by the administrative efficiencies resulting from the incorporation of the Faculty into the School.
- Reduction of expenditure is also being achieved by reaching agreement with the Church over Church support for some of the pastoral training provided by the Faculty.
- With regard to financial management, it is not clear whether the University provides on an annual basis firm targets to the Faculty (either directly, or indirectly through the School) for student numbers and research-related income. It was clear in interview that the University is aware of the level of student numbers that are needed for financial viability of the Faculty, however, and that a rough norm exists with regard to research points more generally in the School.

Part III – General Findings and Recommendation

III.1. Summary of Findings

1. Despite the commitment of the University and the School to the Faculty, the financial situation of the Faculty seems unsustainable. Its income is largely (even if not exclusively) based on its student numbers. Thus strategies for improvement are inextricably linked to increasing the number of students, which must be achieved either by increasing the attractiveness of its programmes to Icelandic students or broadening the base of potential students from beyond Iceland. There is currently little incentive to do the latter.
2. The Faculty has given attention to its teaching programmes, but these remain largely oriented around the necessity to provide a fundamental level of competence across the broad range of sub-disciplines of theology. This is the traditional pattern of preparation required for ministry in the Church. It is also reflected in the nature of the staffing of the Faculty, with (in general) one specialist per theological sub-discipline. Changes appear to be focused upon (i) creating alternative streams of electives within this pattern so that not all students need take biblical languages (for example), and (ii) moving pastoral training from the BA undergraduate programme to the *mag.theol.* programme. Interest also exists in interdisciplinary teaching (with respect to disciplines outside the Faculty), but this appears to be largely undeveloped. Interviews with stakeholders (the Church being the only stakeholders invited to interview) and students, however, did not give reassurance that currently planned changes would in fact substantially increase the programmes' attractiveness.
3. In the SER the Faculty had suggested a major initiative in developing teaching programmes in religious studies. There were a number of practical obstacles to such a development, including appropriate staffing, however. During the site visit notification was given that the religious studies programme had been cut back, despite a continuing interest in it by the School and University.
4. There were serious concerns expressed by the Church over the adequacy and relevance of the current preparation of deacons and the current provision for pastoral formation.
5. In view of Bologna principles regarding progression, there are serious concerns about the overlap that has existed between the courses offered in BA and MA

programmes. While this may be resolved with regard to the new *mag.theol.*, it was less clear that the same would apply to the MA.

6. The doctoral programmes are also recognised to be a serious concern on several levels. These include the small number of students, the lack of a 'programme' for these students, and doubts about the wisdom of encouraging Icelandic students to pursue all preparation for an academic career in a single University.
7. Formal University mechanisms for monitoring the quality of teaching and research were not very apparent within the Review. It is noted that new initiatives were afoot through the Ministry and through the launch of the University's new strategy to enhance such mechanisms.
8. Little evidence was presented to allow an independent judgement on research performance, but it was noted that the School appeared to be satisfied with the Faculty despite the wide fluctuation in 'research points' and no obvious mechanisms for regularly evaluating the quality of research for individual staff.
9. It was noted that opportunities for research grants in the fields of theology and religious studies were limited, but that interest in international research collaborations was strong.
10. The research strategy exhibited diverse foci, described as projects under the aegis of the Institute of Theology. This suggests a high level of activity, but a difficulty in achieving concentration of efforts. This may increase the difficulty of achieving recognition for international excellence in specific areas of research expertise. Moreover, the research strategy indicated a tension between exploring Icelandic religious heritage and pursuing more internationally-oriented projects. In a large Faculty such tensions are more easily accommodated than in a small Faculty.

III.2. Recommendations

1. The School, and possibly the University, should be more actively engaged in the important strategic discussions about the future of the Faculty.
2. The School, and possibly the University, should set formal annual targets for the Faculty aimed at achieving financial sustainability over the next five years.

3. The University should initiate more formal mechanisms for the regular monitoring of teaching quality and research quality, possibly as part of its newly launched strategy.
4. Even if immediate resourcing cannot be found to initiate a Religious Studies undergraduate programme within the Faculty itself, the Faculty should give fresh consideration to how a growing portfolio of attractive courses in religious studies might be offered by collaboration with other parts of the School/University, by a plan to change the staffing in the Faculty over time, and by seed funding for new initiatives in this area. A consequence of staffing changes over time within the Faculty may also require a re-consideration of the shape and purpose of the revised BA programme in theology.
5. The Faculty should increase efforts to find points of critical mass around which to initiate (possibly interdisciplinary) research projects that might draw high levels of international recognition and participation. As a consequence, a pruning of current commitments should be considered. International recognition of excellence in limited and specific research areas might increase the success of winning research grants in such areas within and outwith Iceland, might improve the ability to attract doctoral students from abroad, and might eventually raise the profile sufficiently to draw undergraduate students from abroad. All of these efforts are hampered by a diffuse profile.
6. Without such change, and with current arrangements, it is recommended that consideration be given to whether a meaningful doctoral programme can be continued.
7. The (academic) MA programme must be reviewed in order to ensure its course offerings are absolutely distinctive in relation to the BA programme and that its reliance upon independent study is not at the expense of an appropriate provision of teaching.
8. It is recommended that the Faculty engage in a formal collaborative arrangement with another university (possibly Nordic or German within the Evangelical Lutheran tradition) in order to exchange teaching staff on a regular and effective basis. This could bring expertise into the Faculty which would not otherwise be possible. If exchanges were carefully arranged, they might also help the Faculty to increase their critical mass around key topics of research.

9. In order to support the interdisciplinary efforts within the School that are recommended above in relation to teaching and research, it is recommended that serious re-consideration be given to the location of the Faculty within the Main Building. Whilst there appears to be a strong commitment of the Faculty staff to this location, it is a serious concern that the Faculty may never be able to be a flourishing part of the School if it remains apart from the rest of the School staff. The students of the Faculty of Theology & Religious Studies would benefit by being part of an intellectual milieu where students, teachers, classrooms and study facilities are located in the same building.
10. In order partly to address concerns about the dual aims for the Faculty (i) to meet the legitimate expectations of Icelandic society to hear the voices of the theologians at the University on topics of the day and (ii) to develop a strong international profile through more engagement in strategically-selected international research projects, consideration should be given to a kind of parallel publishing. There are many examples of excellent pieces of research (with all the scholarly footnotes and technical use of languages, published in English or German for an international audience of scholars) being accompanied by a more popular presentation of the research findings (in a revised and more accessible version, published in Icelandic for a wider public). This is a form of “knowledge transfer” which is increasingly being viewed in some parts of the world as one of the responsibilities of a university. This also necessitates no weakening of research focus.

III.3. Signatures of the Expert Committee

Prof. Dr Ronald A. Piper (Scotland)

Prof. Dr Carsten Riis (Denmark)

Appendices

Appendix I. Agenda of Site Visit to University of Iceland 7 January 2011.

09:00-09:45 Meeting with the University Authorities

University of Iceland (Meeting Room of the University Council, Main Building)

- Jón Atli Benediktsson, Vice-Rector of Academic Affairs (confirmed)
- Sigurður J. Hafsteinsson, Director of Finance (confirmed)
- Þórður Kristinsson, Director of Academic Affairs (confirmed)
- Halldór Jónsson, Director of Research (confirmed)
- Magnús D. Baldursson, Managing Director of the Rector's Office and Head of Quality Administration (confirmed)

10:00-10:45 Meeting with the Self-Evaluation Group

University of Iceland (Meeting Room of the University Council, Main Building)

- Pétur Pétursson, Professor, Chair of the Self-Evaluation Group (confirmed)
- Sólveig Anna Bóasdóttir, Head of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies (confirmed)
- Arnfríður Guðmundsdóttir, Professor (confirmed)
- Einar Sigurbjörnsson, Professor (confirmed)
- Ásdís Guðmundsdóttir, director of study in the School of Humanities and project manager for the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies in the office of the School of Humanities (confirmed)
- María Rut Baldursdóttir, theology student, former chairman of the Theological Students' Association, student representative (confirmed)

11:00-11:45 Meeting with Representatives of the Student Body

University of Iceland (Meeting Room of the University Council, Main Building)

- BA-Student, Halla Rut Stefánsdóttir (confirmed)
- BA-Student, Oddur Bjarni Þorkelsson (confirmed)
- MA-Student, Davíð Þór Jónsson (confirmed)
- MA-Student, Eva Björk Valdimarsdóttir (confirmed)
- PhD-Student, Steinunn Arnþrúður Björnsdóttir (confirmed)
- PhD-Student, Ásdís Emilsdóttir Petersen (confirmed)

12:00-13:15 Lunch

13:30-14:45 Tour of the Facilities

- Aðalbygging
- Háskólatorg (Room HT-300) – Presentation of the Intranet (Ugla), Hreinn Pálsson
- National and University Library of Iceland – Handritadeild og gagnasögn, Ingibjörg Bergmundsdóttir et al.
- Supervision: Sólveig Anna Bóasdóttir, Head of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies

15:00-15:45 Meeting with the Authorities of the School of Humanities and the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies

University of Iceland (Meeting Room of the University Council, Main Building)

- Ástráður Eysteinnsson, Dean of the School of Humanities (confirmed)
- Sólveig Anna Bóasdóttir, Head of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies (confirmed)
- Pétur Pétursson, Vice-Head of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies (confirmed)
- Óskar Einarsson, Operational Manager of the School of Humanities (confirmed)

16:00-16:45 Meeting with External Stakeholders

University of Iceland (Meeting Room of the University Council, Main Building)

- Rev. Kristján Valur Ingólfsson (confirmed)
- Rev. Þorvaldur Karl Helgason, secretary to the bishop (confirmed)
- Rev. Guðbjörg Jóhannesdóttir, chair of the Icelandic Association of Pastors (confirmed)
- Nanna Guðrún Zoëga deacon, chair of the Icelandic Association of deacons (confirmed)
- Rev. dr. Sigurður Árni Þórðarson, pastor in Neskirka parish, Reykjavík (confirmed)
- Magnea Sverrisdóttir, deacon (confirmed)

Appendix II. Documents Received

From Rannis:

Act no. 85/2008 on Public Higher Education Institutions (Draft Translation 2008).

Rules on Quality Control of Teaching and Research in Higher Education Institutions No. 3212009.

From UI:

Evaluation of Instruction and Study in the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies - Self-Evaluation Report, March 2010.

Additional data requested by the Expert Panel (December 2011).