



## Report of External Peer Review Group for the Programmatic Review of:

<b>Named Award:</b>	Bachelor of Arts
<b>Programme Title(s):</b>	BA in Religious Studies L7 (3 years) BA (Hons) in Religious Studies (+1 year)
<b>Exit Award(s):</b>	None
<b>Award Type:</b>	Ordinary Degree Honours Degree
<b>Award Class:</b>	Major
<b>NFQ Level:</b>	Level 7 Level 8
<b>ECTS / ACCS Credits:</b>	180 240
<b>Minor Award(s):</b>	None
<b>Location:</b>	Galway

### Panel Members

Name	Position	Organisation
Dr John McDonagh	Chairperson	National University of Ireland Galway
Des Foley	Secretary	Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology
Dr Sean Duffy	IOT Member	Letterkenny Institute of Technology
Dr John Walsh	University Member	National University of Ireland Galway
Patsy McGarry	Professional Practitioner	Irish Times
Constance Masterson	Institute Graduate	

### Programme Board Team

Gerry O'Neill
Barry McMillan
Sheila McHugh

## 1 Introduction

The following report to Academic Council is a validation panel report from an expert panel of assessors on the approval of the programme Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies.

The report is divided into the following sections:

- Background to Proposed Programme
- General Findings of the Validation Panel
- Programme-Level Findings
- Module-Level Findings

## 2 Background to Proposed Programme

See Programme Self Evaluation Report (SER) for more detailed information.

## 3 General Findings of the External Peer Review Group

- The External Peer Review Group (EPRG) reapproves the programme for the next five academic years or until the next programmatic review, whichever occurs sooner, subject to a number of recommendations.
- The EPRG feel that the small group of lecturers is to be commended for their hard work in creating and maintaining a highly innovative, challenging and relevant Humanities degree.
- In light of the socio-economic crisis facing the country, the contextualisation of the programme is engaging and pertinent. The coherence and robustness of the content is most impressive and is on par with or superior to level 8 courses offered by other third level institutions.
- The EPRG would urge GMIT to promote this programme vigorously as it deserves to be the 'jewels in the crown' of its Humanities offering.
- The proposed name changes to "B.A. in Religious Studies, Ethics and Culture" and "B.A. (Hons.) in Religious Studies, Ethics and Culture" were approved. See additional note under Section 8.0.

Having considered the documentation provided and discussed it with the programme development team, the External Peer Review Group recommends the following:

### **Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies**

*Place an x in the correct box.*

Accredited for the next five academic years or until the next programmatic review, whichever occurs sooner	
Accredited subject to recommendations	X

Re-designed and re-submitted to the same External Peer Review Group after additional developmental work	
Not Accredited	

**Note:**

Approval is conditional on the submission of a revised programme document that takes account of the conditions and recommendations outlined below and a response document describing the actions of the Department to address the conditions and recommendations made by the External Peer Review Group (EPRG). In this report, the term Recommendation indicates an item to which the Programme Board should give serious consideration for implementation at an early stage and which should be the subject of on-going monitoring.

**4 Programme-Level Findings**

This section of the report addresses the following programme level considerations:

- Evidence of reflection by the programme board to include, where relevant evidence of collaboration and engagement with other programmes from a similar discipline area within GMIT
- Demand
- Award
- Entry requirements
- Access, transfer and progression
- Retention
- Standards and Outcomes
- Programme structure
- Learning and Teaching Strategies
- Assessment Strategy
- Resource requirements
- Research Activity
- Quality Assurance
- Internationalisation
- Professional Practice (Work Experience / Internship etc)

**4.1 Reflection, including internal and external engagement**

<i>Consideration for the panel:</i>	Is there evidence of reflection in the SER of how the programme performed since the last programmatic review.
<i>Overall Finding:</i>	Yes

**Commendation:**

- Overall the EPRG found that the SER document was a comprehensive and excellently produced document which makes a compelling case for the continuation and development of this programme.

## 4.2 Demand

<i>Consideration for the panel:</i>	Is there a need for the programme and has evidence been provided to support it?
<i>Overall Finding:</i>	Yes to include 1 recommendation

### Commendation:

- The EPRG feel that the programmes is highly important and relevant, both regionally and nationally, in equipping graduates better to understand the complexity of social, cultural, ethical and religious challenges facing Ireland. As this programme is not a CAO offering, it is felt that there may be an untapped demand which is not the target of normal marketing campaigns of the Institute. The programme warrants further support from GMIT and should be developed and expanded in the future.

### Recommendation:

- The EPRG recommend that the programme profile be more broadly advertised by GMIT both internally and externally. Also the current web presence needs to be built on, with the inclusion of social marketing. This programme needs to have a clear identity within the college. There should be an agreed presence and place for it. The EPRG recommend that this programme be fully included within the offerings of the College of Tourism and Arts and marketed strategically and regularly in order to ensure its future viability. This is particularly important given that it is not advertised through traditional channels such as the CAO (see also recommendation 4.2).

## 4.3 Award

<i>Consideration for the panel:</i>	Is the level and type of the award appropriate?
<i>Overall Finding:</i>	Yes to include 1 recommendation

### Recommendation:

- The EPRG recommend that the programme board should also introduce a Level 6 Higher Certificate Stand-Alone Award as opposed to the proposed structure of having a Level 6 Exit Award embedded in this programme.

## 4.4 Entry Requirements

<i>Consideration for the panel:</i>	Are the entry requirements for the proposed programme clear and appropriate? Is there a relationship with this programme and further education?
<i>Overall Finding:</i>	Yes to include 1 recommendation

**Recommendation:**

- The EPRG recommend that the programme board give consideration to providing an annual recruitment entry, or at least more frequent entry, to the programme in a bid to break the current 4 year cycle. This should then be kept under close review going forward.

**4.5 Access, Transfer and Progression**

<i>Consideration for the panel:</i>	Does the proposed programme incorporate the procedures for access, transfer and progression that have been established by the HEA and as contained in the Institute's Quality assurance Framework (QAF) COP No.4?
<i>Overall Finding:</i>	Yes

**4.6 Retention**

<i>Consideration for the panel:</i>	Does the proposed programme comply with the Institute norms for retention, both in first year and subsequent years? Are both elements of the First Year Experience {(i) Learning to Learn (now Learning and Skills Innovation) and (ii) PASS} embedded in this programme? Evidence of other retention initiatives?
<i>Overall Finding:</i>	Yes to include 1 recommendation

**Recommendation:**

- During the panel discussion and the session with students, it became clear that there is a period of adjustment for many students as they are returning to study after a period of time or perhaps undertaking higher education for the first time. The EPRG recommend the provision of generic modules such as the new Learning and Skills Innovation module to be offered in year 1 of this programme. This mainstream support mechanism should be available to help bring students up to speed and to help ease their transition into 3<sup>rd</sup> level education.

**4.7 Standards and Outcomes**

<i>Consideration for the panel:</i>	Does the proposed programme meet the required award standards for programmes at the proposed NFQ level (i.e. conform to QQI Award Standards)?  For parent award? For exit award (if applicable)? For Minor Award (if applicable)? For Special Purpose Award (if applicable)?
<i>Overall Finding:</i>	Yes to include 1 recommendation

The awards standards requirements for programmes on the NFQ Framework can be found at <http://www.hetac.ie/publications/pol01.htm>

**Recommendation:**

- The EPRG recommend that the programme board explore Single Module Certificates such as Special Purpose Awards and Minor Awards. Such options may be attractive to certain cohorts of students who are interested in certain topics or who are uncertain about 'signing up' for the full degree. This would increase the scope for students and upon completing the components, would also lead them to achieving a major award.

**4.8 Programme Structure**

<i>Consideration for the panel:</i>	Is the programme structure logical and well designed and can the stated programme intended learning outcomes in terms of employment skills and career opportunities be met by this programme?
<i>Overall Finding:</i>	Yes

**4.9 Learning and Teaching Strategies**

<i>Consideration for the panel:</i>	Have appropriate learning and teaching strategies been provided for the proposed programme that support Student Centred Learning (SCL)? Evidence of consideration of flexible delivery methods including eLearning?
<i>Overall Finding:</i>	Yes to include 1 recommendation

**Recommendation:**

- The SER refers to the limited introduction of on-line provision for certain topics/modules. The EPRG would urge caution with new delivery modes such as online blended learning as this could be problematic for this programme especially when the richness of class discussion is such an integral part of the learning process. Online delivery should be used as a support mechanism if students had missed a class, rather than an alternative way of teaching. It should be used only when necessary in response to the needs of the student cohort.

**4.10 Assessment Strategies**

<i>Consideration for the panel:</i>	Have appropriate programme assessment strategies been provided for the proposed programme (as outlined in the QQI/HETAC Assessment and Guidelines, 2009)?
<i>Overall Finding:</i>	Yes

Assessment strategies are required in line with HETAC's Assessment and Standards and should be considered by the programme EPRG. See (HETAC (2009) Assessment and Standards, Section 4.6.1, page 33). Accordingly the assessment strategy should address the following (See (HETAC (2009) Assessment and Standards, Section 2.2.5, page 13) :

- Description and Rationale for the choice of assessment tasks, criteria and procedures. This should address fairness and consistency, specifically their validity, reliability and authenticity;
- Describe any special regulations;
- Regulate, build upon and integrate the module assessment strategies;
- Provide contingent strategy for cases where learners claim exemption from modules, including recognition of prior learning;
- Ensure the programme's continuous assessment workload is appropriately balanced;
- Relate to the learning and teaching strategy;
- Demonstrate how grading criteria will be developed to relate to the Institutional grading system.

#### 4.11 Resource Requirements

<i>Consideration for the panel:</i>	Does the Institute possess the resources and facilities necessary to deliver the proposed programme?
<i>Overall Finding:</i>	Yes to include 1 recommendation

##### Recommendation:

- As the programme is delivered in the evening, there have been issues with administration, rooms, exam scheduling and so on. The Identity of this programme should be afforded proper recognition within GMIT, in particular with regard to the proper scheduling of exams and also with administrative support.

#### 4.12 Research Activity

<i>Consideration for the panel:</i>	Evidence that Learning & Teaching is informed by research? Number of staff engaged in institutional/pedagogical research?
<i>Overall Finding:</i>	Yes

##### Commendation:

- There is a healthy level of research given the small number involved in the team.

#### 4.13 Quality Assurance

<i>Consideration for</i>	Does the proposed programme demonstrate how the Institute's
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<i>the panel:</i>	quality assurance procedures (QAF) have been applied and that satisfactory procedures exist for the on-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes?
<i>Overall Finding:</i>	Yes

#### 4.14 Internationalisation

<i>Consideration for the panel:</i>	Does the proposed programme demonstrate how the syllabi represent an international dimension? Is there evidence of approaches to induct international students?
<i>Overall Finding:</i>	Yes

#### 4.15 Professional Practice (Work Experience / Internships etc)

<i>Consideration for the panel:</i>	Does the proposed programme incorporate professional practice as per the Institute's policy on professional practice (PP)? If not, is there evidence that PP is under consideration by the programme board?
<i>Overall Finding:</i>	No

The programme board had considered a work placement element to the programme but thought it unlikely to be advantageous. It was noted that because this programme is run as a part time evening course, the majority of students were already working so there is no work placement module.

#### 5.0 Module Assessment Strategies

<i>Consideration for the panel:</i>	Have appropriate module assessment strategies been included in each Module Descriptor?
<i>Overall Finding:</i>	Yes

#### 6.0 Student Findings

2 students attended the meeting. They had both just completed their final year 4 exams.

They enjoyed the programme immensely and felt it nourished and expanded their minds. They have better insight to different cultures, nationalities and religions as a result.

One said that the lecturers have a broad minded view and he had 'learned how to think rather than what to think' and now had 'tools for life for understanding the world' and the 'tolerance to create a better world'.



They found however that there was a lack of administrative support with regard to the exam timetables. They went in for exams in the past and no invigilators turned up, another time the room was locked.

The students recommended that the programme should be advertised better. One student heard about the course from a Brochure at his local church and the other glimpsed the advertisement in the local newspaper so it was by chance that they applied for the programme at all.

**Commendation:**

- The EPRG felt that the students were passionate and insightful about this programme.

**7.0 Stakeholder Engagement**

It was noted that this programme fulfils civic engagement, engagement with mature students and engagement with a cohort of students that would not normally be engaging with GMIT and this makes this programme unique and endangered so it needs to be supported by GMIT

One particular point which was noted is that the programme is delivered by a secular institution and, as such, gives it a unique positioning and possibly an advantage over similar programmes.

**8.0 Future Plans**

<i>Consideration for the panel:</i>	Evidence that the programme board considered and identified opportunities and signalled proposals for related new programme and award development.
<i>Overall Finding:</i>	Yes to include 3 recommendations

**Recommendations:**

- This programme needs to have a clear identity within the college. There should be an agreed presence and place for it. The EPRG recommend that this programme be fully included within the College of Tourism and Arts.
- The EPRG suggest that the programme board review the title after a period of time from 'Religious Studies' to 'Religions'. This may help attract a wider range of students to the course.
- The EPRG promote the possibility of integrating a module on Ethics into other programmes. This will support the value of Ethics being embedded across the institute. A proposal would be to run a Food Ethics module on a pilot basis.

**Validation Panel Report Approved By:**

**Signed:**



**Dr John McDonagh  
Chairperson**

**Date:**

27/4/2015