

ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENTS OF THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

FRAMEWORK OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Introduction

1.0 The situation facing teachers and researchers.

Various professional bodies, including academic associations have drawn up codes of professional practice. As concern for good standards of ethics is increasing, it is appropriate that AUDTRS, as a consultative body for Theology and Religious Studies (TRS), should be responsible for developing a framework for good practice within the subject area.

The formulation of a framework of professional practice should not be taken to imply that there exists significant malpractice within the subject area of Theology and Religious Studies (TRS), but rather to show that TRS is no less concerned about ethics than other subject areas that have already devised codes of practice. Increasingly, there are institutional pressures to demonstrate good ethical practice, evidenced by the presence of Ethics Committees, and many areas of TRS involve decisions bearing ethical implications.

1.1 Aims

This framework of professional practice aims:

- (a) to demonstrate that those who work in the subject area have a concern for good ethical practice, which goes beyond mere risk management;
- (b) to enable teachers and researchers to demonstrate that their teaching and research is being conducted in a responsible way, which is sensitive to ethical issues and questions;
- (c) to comply with QAA benchmarking requirements.

Codes of practice should not hamper good research and good practice. Questions of ethics are often controversial, and hence any code should not impose prescribed courses of action in situations where conscience and moral choice should be legitimately exercised. TRS involves the teaching of ethics, which itself is a controversial activity, and in which there are often no agreed answers.

1.2 The context of TRS

TRS is a large and diverse area, ranging from textual analysis to ethnographical study. It is an inter-disciplinary field, crossing with other disciplines such as history, politics, anthropology and archaeology. Codes of practice already exist in other subject areas, and hence teachers and researchers in TRS can reasonably be expected to give serious attention to their guidelines.

1.3 The status of AUDTRS

AUDTRS is not a membership organization, and hence does not have ‘members’ over whom to exercise jurisdiction. Therefore, any such ‘policing’ of a code of ethical practice would be unfeasible and undesirable. Many ethical decisions are inherently controversial, and are matters either for individual conscience or institutional policy. However, it is expected that teachers and researchers would give serious attention to the issues highlighted in this framework, and not simply act out of expediency or without regard for those affected by professional decisions.

2.0 Framework of Professional Practice

2.1 To whom is this framework of practice addressed?

Teachers, researchers and students are the principal categories of people who are faced with ethical decisions relating to TRS. Since AUDTRS is an association of teachers, it is envisaged that those who teach and supervise research would oversee good practice among students.

2.2 How does the TRS Framework of Practice relate to other professional codes?

This Framework of Practice addresses subject-specific issues, and not generic ones that apply to all teachers and researchers. Teachers and researchers in TRS are affected by (i) their own institutional codes of practice and regulations; (ii) codes of practice in related and overlapping areas, e.g. sociology, psychology; (iii) human rights legislation. Teachers of TRS can be expected to pay due regard for such codes and relevant legislation.

2.3 How are matters of conscience to be regarded?

Teachers and researchers in TRS will feel constrained to exercise individual conscience, either because their own religious or ethical beliefs are incompatible with the demands of another faith that they are studying, or because of the complex and controversial nature of many ethical issues. Any framework for professional practice should not override the religious or ethical sensitivities of teachers, students or researchers.

2.4 What bearing do the religious convictions of teachers, researchers and students have on teaching and studying TRS?

A teacher’s religious beliefs (or lack of them) potentially have a bearing on his or her teaching. There is no clear answer to the question of whether one declares one’s own religious beliefs, or whether one asks students to declare theirs.

A distinction exists between teaching a religion and practising it. Requiring students to undergo religious activities in the classroom (e.g. prayer) is usually unacceptable in secular institutions. However, it must be recognised that some TRS staff are responsible for the training of religious leaders and workers, for example in theological seminaries, where commitment is an expectation and may at times be appropriately celebrated.

2.5 What people or bodies have an interest in one's work?

A variety of individuals and bodies — sometimes referred to as ‘stakeholders’ — are affected by teaching and research in TRS: teachers, researchers, students, academic institutions, religious communities, funding bodies.

Due regard for the interests of stakeholders is important. Teachers and researchers can be expected to show awareness of these interested parties. The use of informants and religious communities for study creates a situation where teachers, students and researchers clearly benefit from their relationship, but due consideration of ‘empowerment’ is important, ensuring that informants and communities ‘get something back’ from their work.

2.6 What are one's relationships with religious communities?

Religious communities are often subjects for research in Religious Studies, but they also provide the environments from which many students come. While secular institutions are normally committed to equal opportunities policies, including avoidance of discrimination on the grounds of religion, religious training colleges cannot readily implement such a policy, and would consider it undesirable.

Religious organisations themselves are not necessarily committed to equal opportunities in the sense normally defined by academic institutions, and may have strong views on sexual orientation, or the respective roles of men and women, which contrast with those of the dominant culture. Students and researchers may therefore expect segregation on the grounds of sex, and sometimes the exclusion of one sex (more commonly women) from certain activities or areas within a religious building. While it should be evident to students that the teacher does not necessarily condone such discriminatory ideas, effective field work may demand compliance, and teachers and students may at times need to consider the degree of participant-observation that is appropriate.

Teachers should consider the appropriateness of placing students in environments where adherents might seek to convert them. Equally, teachers and students should be aware of their role as empathetic enquirers, rather than critics.

Religious affiliation does not exempt teachers and researchers from complying with secular expectations about professional integrity and responsibility.

2.7 From whom is it appropriate to receive funding?

There is no agreed view among academics as to whether to accept funding or sponsorship from bodies that are at times judged to be controversial, and AUDTRS has no wish to impose an answer on this difficult area. Colleagues are encouraged to weigh up the issues involved, paying due regard to the notions of academic freedom, conscience, possible bias that can result from external funding, and the purposes for which one's research might be used.

3.0 How will AUDTRS maintain professional standards of practice?

AUDTRS exists as a consultative body. It is committed to integrity and responsibility within TRS, and encourages reflection and discussion on issues of ethics and professional practice. This framework of practice is formally endorsed by TRS, and is subject to periodic review.

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