



**Report on the Quinquennial Review of MTh Radical Free Church Movements, MTh in Applied Theology, MTh in Biblical Studies, MTh in Christian Doctrine, MTh in Preaching, MA in Advanced Christian Studies, MA in Christian Faith and Practice, MA in Mission and Ministry, BD (Hons), BTh (Hons) and BTh (non hons), Certificate/Diploma in Theology (Mission and Ministry) and Certificate (Preaching) at Spurgeon's College, London on Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> June 2011**

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**The Panel**

Dr Gary Pritchard  
(Chair) University of Wales Faculty

Rev. Canon Dr James Francis  
The Diocese of Durham External Assessor

Dr Helen Costigane  
Heythrop College External Assessor

**In Attendance**

Prof William Kay  
Glyndwr University Moderator

Dr Frances Knight  
Bangor University Moderator

Prof. Trevor Hart  
University of St Andrews External Examiner

Dr Philip Endean  
Campion Hall External Examiner (written comments only)

Rev Dr David Firth  
Nottingham St John External Examiner

Miss Hannah Croft  
University of Wales, Validation Unit Officer

Miss Holly Billington  
University of Wales, Validation Unit Officer

**1. Introduction**

Spurgeon's College based in South London operates a number of courses. It is one of the longest standing validated programmes of the University of Wales that has been through 3 Quinquennial Reviews prior to the current Quinquennial Review documented below. Spurgeon's College was founded in 1856 and exists to offer accredited ministerial training and theological education for church workers. It operates in association with the Baptist Union of Great Britain but offers courses on a cross-denominational basis.

## **2. The Review Process**

In preparation for the review Spurgeon's College prepared a long and detailed self evaluation document (SED). The Validation Unit appointed two independent assessors and a chair person (who is a member of the University of Wales Faculty) to review the SED along with other course material in advance of the review event. The panel then came together in London where they met with the management team, the teaching staff, the external examiners, the moderator and the students independently for an open and frank discussion about the running of the schemes over the past 5 years and about the future of the schemes for the forthcoming quinquennium. The following is a report of the discussions from the event.

## **3. Course Management**

The mission of Spurgeon' College is to prepare Christians for the church's mission and ministry in the contemporary world. Spurgeon's College has a strong management structure which is run by a board of trustees. The validated courses are managed through the internal committee called the Academic Board. The Board is made up of trustees, teachers, student representatives and external members. In addition to the validated courses offered, they also have other validating partners for a DMin and courses in continuing professional development for lay ministers. As part of the widening of access Spurgeon's College stated that they did not have a differentiate fee for international students.

The panel wanted to know about the financial stability of the College. The College reported that they faced a challenge in 2011 as they are predicting a budget deficit. They identified that the reason for the shortfall was due to a fall they received from legacy income, but they assured the panel that the majority of their income streams were stable. To improve the situation the College are looking to improve their income recovery, to make cost saving and to appoint a Fundraiser. They identified that they also needed to increase the student numbers. The panel wanted to know how the change in visa requirements in the UK will affect the College. The College stated that they did not envisage the changes will affect them because they were an 'A' rated college which is accredited by the BAC. Also they only have an annual intake of 10 international students per annum which is not such a significant proportion of their overall student body.

Recruitment onto the validated schemes had fallen over the past 5 years. To encourage entrance onto their courses the College had developed a taster module through their online platform. Students take the single module and from this entrance point they then progress onto the validated schemes. The online platform had been an excellent tool for widening the access for students to study. The College found that this has increased their recruitment onto the validated schemes. Spurgeon's College identifies their niche as mentoring students from initial interest through to undergraduate and postgraduate degree level.

In addition to their online recruitment, the College also had other recruitment streams. The majority of full time recruitments are candidates seeking Baptist ordination. To be able to apply to study, students go through a preliminary process within their church. Following this the College puts all applicants through a rigorous application process. Part time applicants are normally from a variety of different backgrounds and denominations. They have a tendency to already be based in a placement situation within their home church setting and more than likely to study alongside their work. The part time students go through a similar rigorous entrance procedures as full time students. Full time students generally wanted to complete the degree whereas part time students are inclined to have different objectives. The College thought there were on average more dropouts who were part time largely due to socio and economic reasons; however transfer from part time to full time was quite common because of changes in students' aspirations during their studies.

Part of the validated schemes involved student placements into a church or ministry setting. Spurgeon's College employs a placement coordinator to oversee all the placements. With the placement the student has a designated supervisor who reports on the student but does not assess the student. All assessment is examined by Spurgeon's College designated staff. The panel wanted to know how the College manages risks such as health and safety and safe guarding for all participants. The College informed that all students are CRB checked before their placement but health and safety is responsibility of the placement staff. Should a student experience difficulties in their placement which cannot be resolved the College organises a transfer to an alternative placement. College based students tend to have localised placements whereas part time students tended to come with their own placement setting. Spurgeon's College recognised that not all placement locations are ideal. If a placement falls below a certain standard then the College intervenes for the student and makes alternative arrangements for mentoring within the setting.

#### **4. Quality Assurance**

The quality monitoring of the courses is undertaken through the internal committee termed the Quality Committee. The committee is made of teachers, students and external members. To close the loop on student feedback the College also has a Student and Staff Liaison Committee which meets 3 times a year and gives official feedback.

Student feedback is gathered by the College in an end of module appraisal forms where the students could provide comments to express their view of the module, the students also have the option to complete the forms anonymously if desired. The feedback forms are processed and examined centrally and the findings are then reported back to the students. It was however unclear to the panel as to the exact level of feedback which the students actually received.

#### **5. Course Content and Structure**

In the last quinquennial the College had developed a range of MA programmes to include Christian Faith and Practice, Mission and Ministry and Advanced Christian Studies. The MA in Christian Faith and Practice was designed as an introductory course for people without any prior degree in theology, but may have a degree in another discipline. The College has however found that the programme has had a mixed response. Some students do really well in the course while others struggle with its content. Spurgeon's College found it difficult to assess how students will do in the course at the point of application. To develop students further they had decided to request a written text as part of the entry procedure. They identified a market niche for the course but they are concerned as to whether the master's level is appropriate to its market.

The panel wanted to know how the College get people from different backgrounds to the same level. The College reported that they give their students a study day to help them to develop their research skills, academic writing and critical thinking in theology. They also encouraged students to submit a draft assignment so that the tutors can identify how to support, as well as to mentor students in English language skills. The College's overall approach is to encourage an open theologically evaluative stance wherein students are free to disagree with received Baptist traditions. The College generally finds that the biggest challenge is to develop critical thinking from students with a fundamentalist mindset.

As part of the meeting with the external examiners it was realised that there were recurring issues with the classification of grades of the undergraduate degrees. The external examiners would prefer to see a model for the degree classification which was mainly mathematical and used the marking descriptors against the learning outcomes. In addition external examiners stated that internal markers were generally too modest and that they would prefer to see the marker using the full range of marks. The panel asked the College to explain how the undergraduate degree courses were weighted and how the final

classification was being reached. The College stated that the classification of the undergraduate degrees was based upon level 6 scores so that they can give students the maximum opportunity to improve. They assured the panel that they had noted the external examiners' comments and that they were moving towards a two thirds weighting and are in the process of generating a policy on this. The changes will be effective for the forthcoming academic year.

The panel wanted to know how the College assisted their students in formational learning as this gives a value added experience for the students. The College stated that they appoint each student with a Pastoral Tutor and that they encouraged students to reflect on their academic work on a personal level. They also have assessed work which incorporates ministerial ethics. Informally students are encouraged in formational learning at peer level at the College retreats. The College identified that it was difficult to undertake formational learning in online studies but they had built in a self reflective component into the taster module. The panel questioned whether this could be integrated further into the academic teaching.

## **6. Assessment**

The panel noted that the College had abandoned the assessed presentation in a certain module. The panel wanted to ensure that Spurgeon's College continues to use a variety of assessment methods. The College stated that they have other modules which are assessed by means of presentations, although student feedback indicated that they did not always find listening to each other's presentations helpful.

The panel wanted to know how the College manages plagiarism. The College stated that they do not utilise Turnitin, preferring to rely upon the expertise of the internal examiners. Should they identify cases of plagiarism then the College has a differentiated response depending upon the severity of the case. They realised that almost all cases of plagiarism are cultural and that students were generally in need of educating in this area. They therefore hold seminars with the students to advise them on what is plagiarism and for part time students there is formative assessment which gives direct feedback.

## **7. Staffing and Staff Development**

Spurgeon's College operates an equal opportunities recruitment policy but they do find it hard to recruit personnel who have a balance of different ethnicity and gender with both academic and practical experience. They acknowledged that there are currently curriculum gaps which are due to staff losses but they are looking to fill these by integrating teaching of visiting lecturers. The visiting lecturers that they recruit tended to be more cutting edge in terms of ministerial experience.

Spurgeon's College view their teaching as research informed. They actively encourage their staff to develop areas of expertise and interest. The panel acknowledge that good achievements in research had been achieved by the faculty. The College is looking into setting up peer review on teaching; their Quality Committee is currently looking at the process. They had held a staff training session on peer review with an external visitor from the University of Greenwich and this area will be developed in the coming months.

## **8. Resources**

The panel were given a tour of the resources available at the College. The library had undergone a complete refurbishment within the past 5 years. The library contained a large number of books and journals for both referencing and loaning. The panel were pleased to see that the journals reflected an impressively wide range of academic, ministerial and ecumenical perspectives. In addition to its own collection the library had developed an agreement which meant that it could participate in inter-library loans.

The panel were also given a demonstration of their learning resource platform called Spurgeon's Online. The platform had an open source collection of resources to include course documents, lecture outlines, articles, study skills data and a link to the University of Wales Online Library. The platform design was outsourced but the administration of the platform is undertaken internally by two administrative staff. The panel heard that the University of Wales Online Library is now a valued asset for both students and staff which provides not only full text articles but also includes links to other useful subject resources.

### **9. Student Support and Feedback**

The students at Spurgeon's College spoke highly both of the staff and the learning experience as a whole. Positive aspects of the College which students commented on included the fact that they were challenged both academically and practically and peer interaction which enabled them to engage in debate and challenge viewpoints. An example was given where a student essay challenged the theological position of the Baptist tradition, but achieved an exceptional pass due to its scholarly and academic robustness. The students also had positive remarks about the organisation of the placements and having a member of staff responsible for the placements within the College.

The panel noted that the students were appreciative of the resources available; in particular the online learning resources were proving to be of great value. A comment was heard regarding the number of copies of each book the library held. On occasions it was not possible to loan the book required but in general this did not appear to be a frequent problem and would not cause the students to be disadvantaged.

The students stated that they felt pressure towards the end of the semester as the deadlines for the majority of their assignments submissions were all sited at the end of the semester which could create a bunching effect. Whilst some of the problems may be due in part to the students' ability for time keeping and organisation, the panel felt that distributing the deadlines for some of the assignments over the semester would be of benefit.

Students felt that there was a clear need for improved guidance regarding academic writing. Some students stated that they struggled with the concept of academic writing and referencing but they were unsure of where to go for assistance. The panel thought it was apparent that there is a need to educate the students more effectively on the fundamentals of academic writing and to provide extra assistance where necessary for students who have not come from an academic background.

### **10. Relationship with the University of Wales**

Spurgeon's College stated that they appreciated their relationship with the University of Wales and that they would like the relationship to continue. They do however find that the level of scrutiny from the University a lot to deal with at times. The chair person acknowledged their comments and stated that the University of Wales is looking to streamline their requirements.

### **11. Conclusion**

The Chair thanked Spurgeon's College for their openness in answering the questions put to them and for their kind hospitality during the event.

The panel wished to **commend** the College on the process by which they manage ministerial placements, their sensitivity to ecumenical diversity, their strong learning resources culture, their quality assurance and enhancement culture, and for fulfilling the College mission in the commitment to train people for ministry in all its different forms. The panel also wanted to commend the staff on their commitment to research.

The panel wished to recommend to the Taught Degree Board that the programmes continue to run for the next 5 years subject to the meeting of the following **conditions**:

1. To formalise an algorithm that determines the degree classification and uses the full range of assessment marks and ensure that students are aware of the marking criteria.
2. To close the loop on student feedback and ensure that module and general response is properly fed back to the students.

The above stated conditions need to be implemented for the forthcoming academic session and need to be reviewed at the Joint Board of Studies in December 2011.

The panel also wanted Spurgeon's College to give careful consideration to the following **recommendations**:

- To review the assessment schedule to avoid bunching of submissions.
- To review the study skills provision for adequacy for all students.
- To clarify the referencing system to students for consistency.
- To continue to review in consultation with the external examiners and moderator the MA Christian Faith and Practice scheme.

Hannah Croft & Holly Billington  
June 2011