ASSESSMENT REPORT

REL315116 STUDIES OF RELIGION

General Comments

This year, 209 students from across the state sat the Studies of Religion 3 exam. The majority of candidates were able to provide sufficient evidence of knowledge and understanding of the core beliefs and practices of two religions and the application of two ethical theories to a contemporary ethical issue. In so doing, the candidates met the minimum requirements of key knowledge and understanding prescribed by this very content rich course.

Completing three essays of a high standard in three hours is a significant challenge. Only the best prepared and strongest candidates were able to provide three essays with equally detailed, accurate and clearly articulated argument. Teachers and future candidates need to be aware that candidates wishing to attain the highest award must address all the expectations of the externally assessed criteria in equal measure. Time management to ensure that sufficient time is allowed for three equal responses is essential. Each of the three responses required equally detailed knowledge, well-structured argument, deep analysis and supporting evidence for the A rating across all criteria. Even candidates who sit the exam with high internal ratings need to be aware that the external examination can be a thorough test of their knowledge and essay writing skills.

There is clear distinction emerging between a student’s abilities to gain high ratings on Criterion 1 internally on research assignments and the difficulty of the same student recalling these facts, terms and concepts under exam conditions. This is an issue that needs to be addressed during the academic year. Regular opportunities for students to practice writing under the pressure of time needs to be found in order to hone these skills. That said, candidates demonstrated a good grasp of relevant information on the topic they were addressing in their responses. However, as stressed in last year’s report, when a response contains ‘information only’ it will NOT be well rewarded.

There were responses of an exemplary standard which were truly praiseworthy. These exceptionally well-rewarded responses selected appropriate information, provided supporting evidence, conducted a structured well-reasoned argument and evaluated the information presented.

Markers must be able to read the response to reward candidates appropriately. Illegible writing makes the marker’s job difficult, as does hand writing that is too small and written in pencil. Incorrect spelling of specialist terms is disconcerting to a marker. Time spent ensuring correct use of terminology can boost ratings on both Criterion 1 and Criterion 4 and the keeping of glossaries of terms during the academic year is strongly advised.

A growing number of candidates are struggling to write more than three pages on each essay response which is a concern given the complexity of the demands of the subject matter in the course. Once again, opportunities to practice handwriting under the pressure of time needs to be built into the scope and sequencing of summative tasks throughout the 2019 academic year.
Section A – Religious Traditions and Beliefs

Candidates found the quotation in Question 1 and the Leunig stimulus cartoon in Question 2 more than accessible for analysing the core beliefs and practices of the religious tradition they had studied. Question 1 had two distinct parts which strong candidates were able to address in their introduction, revisit throughout the body of their essay and refer to again in a strong conclusion. To ignore the stem statement, “Faith is about doing. You are how you act, not just how you believe” is to fail to address the question. Once again, beliefs and practices need to be included in the candidate’s response in equal measure. It is pleasing to see that students made an explicit connection between the ethical dimension of their chosen religious tradition and the “way the tradition relates to the world around them”.

Question 2 was selected by more candidates and the Leunig cartoon allowed candidates to open up interesting analysis of the choices human beings make in their search for meaning. Once again, viewing the world through the lens of an adherent assisted candidates to discuss “how one ought to live one’s life”. This enabled candidates to reflect on the human condition and the life choices made by the individual adherent. This discussion enabled the candidates to evaluate the way an adherent responds and takes up the challenges of living out the core beliefs and practices of their religious tradition within the context of a community of faith.

Judaism
Whilst a small number of candidates chose to write about the Jewish faith, the quality of responses overall were strong and showed good understanding of core beliefs and practices of this religious tradition.

Irrespective of the religious tradition chosen, candidates with a thorough understanding of the core beliefs and practices of their religious tradition were well rewarded. Stronger candidates who were able to demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the sub-traditions within a religious tradition and quote from sacred texts and scholarly secondary sources were also well rewarded. This was certainly the case with those candidates who selected to study Judaism.

Buddhism
The majority of candidates in the state studied Buddhism as their first tradition. Those who fared best showed clarity of argument and accurate understanding of the tradition and sub-traditions. Candidates who engaged with the statement stem in Question 1 or the Leunig cartoon in Question 2 in concert with the specifically framed question were well rewarded. With such a large cohort, strong responses really jumped at the markers for their high quality of information, correct spelling of terms, correct quotations and references and addressing the specific requirements of the question.

Overall, the Buddhism essays tended to contain too many beliefs listed by rote and not sufficient reference to the sub-traditions or expressions nor how these expressions provide meaning to the belief. Stronger candidates were able to confidently discuss the difference in belief and expression between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhists. Strong understanding of the Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path, Three Marks of Existence, the Four Sights and Three Jewels were pleasingly evident. However, engagement with Question 1 and Question 2 required the candidate to engage more deeply with how being a Buddhist affects the way you live ethically and how you make sense of the world. Whilst this point is inferred through discussion of the Buddha’s enlightenment and his engagement with the nature and cause of human suffering – more explicit connections would assist the marker to be confident that the student is able to view the world (and how one ought to be in it) through a Buddhist lens. Likewise, the ethical considerations demanded of a Buddhist with all their karmic consequences needed to be addressed at a far deeper level.
Christianity:
The standard of responses for this tradition was high with detailed discussion and analysis. If the number of pages written indicate the depth of knowledge, these essays were longer than average general responses written. All responses addressed the course document on knowledge, however, some fell into the trap of adopting a slightly formulaic structure. The best responses used quotes throughout from both biblical sources and secondary sources citing the work of significant theologians. This cohort demonstrated a deep understanding of the rituals or sacraments, articulated the differences in expression between denominations and incorporated accurate and relevant terminology for each form of expression through ritual and variant. Best responses also analysed the paradox of living a ‘good’ life by the rules versus a ‘loving’ life of service and faithful community to all humanity. Weaker responses delivered a list of beliefs and rituals without developing the nuances of the tradition and how expression translates into meaning and develop the faith relationship between God and the adherent.

Islam
Candidates that studied the core beliefs and practices of Islam were a strong cohort. The candidates who applied the Islamic lens to respond to Question 1 and Question 2 did so with strong attention to the Five Pillars and Principles of Islamic belief. Stronger candidates were able to assert that to be an observant Muslim, practices and beliefs are indivisible. Those same candidates were able to articulate clearly how submission to Allah influences ethical decision making and day to day choices about how an observant Muslim must be in the world. Stronger responses observed that there is no division between religious and civic life for a Muslim. In the day to day, month to month and year by year submission to Allah - belief and practices are deeply interconnected. References to nuance in belief and practices between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims were well articulated by stronger candidates. Direct reference to the Qur'an and work of scholars such as Abdullah Saeed were well rewarded.

Section B – Significant Challenge and Change – Historical and Contemporary

Irrespective of whether the candidate was responding to a Historical or Contemporary challenge the two questions had the same three requirements. Firstly, to explain clearly what the challenge was, secondly analyse its impact on the tradition and finally analyse the response of the tradition to the challenge. With respect to some chosen challenges such as the Reformation in Christianity, the Chinese Invasion of Tibet or the Holocaust for those of Jewish faith - sufficient time has elapsed for variance in responses to become clear. With respect to Islam and the rise of indiscriminate acts of Terrorism purporting to be enacted in the name of Islam, the consequences for the religion are very much at the fore of contemporary debate and media attention which can make sourcing reliable commentators difficult. The strong advice of markers is to look to the more scholarly work of Dr Peter Vardy, Karen Armstrong, Abdullah Saeed and others when researching contemporary challenges in Islam.

The majority of candidates in the state selected contemporary challenges in Islam for study with smaller numbers again looking at Aboriginal Spirituality, the Christian Reformation and the Chinese Invasion of Tibet. For this reason, the marker’s report will address the specific criterion of this section in order to flesh out some criterion-specific observations and suggestions for improvement in this section of the paper.
Criterion 1
This criterion was generally done quite well. Most students could use at least some key terminology in context. Stronger responses drew information from more aspects of the syllabus, whereas weaker responses tended to have a more limited field of key terminology. Weaker responses also failed to draw nuanced distinctions between concepts, for example, suggesting there were simply “extremists” and “non-extremists”. In the same way, there was a tendency in responses on Aboriginal Spiritualities to use some specific dialect words, such as ‘Kanyini’, as representative of all Aboriginal traditions. Stronger responses also focused on demonstrating their specific detail when describing and analysing the responses (as the question required) rather than on the nature of the challenge itself. For example, some students knew a great deal about the family history of Osama Bin Laden, but were less able to give specific detail about how the religious tradition has responded to the challenge of the emergence of acts of terror falsely purported to be in the name of Islam.

Criterion 2
The key distinction in this criterion was nuance or subtlety. Stronger responses were careful with their language and avoided generalisations. Weaker responses tended to throw around rather emotive value statements without the necessary caveats. Stronger responses in this criterion also weighted their material toward the second half of the question (describing and analysing the response of the tradition) and clearly integrated the language of “response” into their topic sentences. Structurally, weaker responses tended to list the impacts of the challenge in an unconnected way.

Criterion 3
Stronger responses on this criterion did two things: they analysed the perspective of their evidence rather than simply quoting it and they spent the majority of their time teasing out the various strands of response within the religious tradition (thus showing their understanding of the diversity and complexity of the issue). Pleasingly, most responses were able to identify at least some of the differing interpretations of the issue within the tradition, however it is important that essays on Islam go beyond giving an apologetic (for example, by showing the Qur’an does indeed bestow equal worth on men and women before Allah) and show how the religious tradition has been shaped by the felt weight of the challenge. The same can be said for all responses – there tended to be an over-emphasis on how the tradition, or specific people within the tradition, were impacted rather than the way the tradition has been reconfigured in its belief and practice in response to the challenge.

Criterion 4
This criterion was largely done well. The number of candidates able to quote at length, and then cite, evidence from sacred texts, scholars and specific events to support their argumentation was pleasing. Weaker responses tended to draw on either too narrow a range of evidences (for example, one or two Qur’anic quotes) or to make a number of general assertions without support from either the sacred texts or secondary scholars. Again, as an extension on Criterion 3, those candidates who could synthesise and explore evidence from opposing perspectives, and use contemporary case studies, were more sophisticated.
Section C - Ethics – General observations

Students were mostly able to apply the theories discussed to their ethical issue in detail, however; there were very few who identified similarities and differences between the theories.

Having to apply two theories didn’t allow for as much detail/depth when outlining the theory but in some cases the explanation of the theory was VERY brief and only mentioned the absolute basics, in some cases the overview was summed up in a few short sentences without actually explaining the various aspects, making application to the issue and analysis very weak. In contrast, some candidates did not explain the issue sufficiently before launching into application and analysis.

There was a good variety of topics chosen, and in amongst the tried and true topics of abortion and euthanasia, other topics chosen included capital punishment, war, animal testing, and drug use. Natural Moral Law and Utilitarianism were the favoured theories for the majority of responses.

All responses had appropriately chosen topics that related to the theme of being ‘of vital importance to human life’.

Question 5 did not specify that the candidates should provide two contrasting ethical frameworks but it was encouraging to see that most candidates did elect to offer alternative views. Those candidates who applied two similar ethical frameworks to an ethical issue of vital importance to human life had some difficulty in providing evidence of addressing Criterion 5 as analysing the similarities and differences fell short in these responses.

Good responses to Question 5 were able to provide analysis of the two ethical frameworks applied to the ethical issue and evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of those applications. Furthermore, candidates who addressed the "impact of decision making" that was specified in the question were well rewarded.

Question 6 did, in fact, specify that the candidates should provide two contrasting ethical frameworks and most candidates ensured that they addressed this specification. Unfortunately, some candidates failed to address the initial part of the question: "What are some of the key questions raised by this issue...?". Candidate responses that achieved highly, posed key questions raised by the ethical issue and then analysed responses to these key questions from contrasting ethical viewpoints. Furthermore, quality responses demonstrated the understanding of a "contemporary ethical debate" and provided clarifications when necessary.

Candidates that provided an overview of two contrasting ethical frameworks with little analysis of the frameworks (e.g. similarities and differences, and, strengths and weaknesses) failed to meet the standard of Criterion 5. It was encouraging to see most candidates who identified some key questions raised by their issue were able to draw some sort of conclusion which aimed to provide an answer to these key questions.
Criterion 1
Criterion 1 deals with the level of detailed and relevant knowledge displayed and utilised in the essay; students are reminded that they need not provide a recapitulation of the historical development of each theory, but instead must show that they can apply the concepts of ethical theories to their chosen topic. There was a requirement in the question to use two ethical theories and apply them to the topic, and the stronger responses did this very effectively. These responses explained the nature of the theories, whether they were teleological or deontological, relative or absolute, religious or secular, etc., and went into great detail on the finer aspects of theory.

Weaker responses lacked detail of theory, used terms incorrectly and referred to theoretical content in vague terms (e.g. utilitarianism demands the greatest happiness for the greatest number). A number of weaker responses that referred to Natural Moral Law failed to mention the primary and secondary precepts, focused solely on interior and exterior acts and/or the doctrine of double effect. Weaker responses did not directly state the relevance of the precepts to the issue. Some responses only used one theory which impacted on the candidates’ overall ratings on this section of the paper.

Criterion 2
Criterion 2, which concerned communication and structuring of the essay response, necessarily includes correct usage of grammar and spelling. It was noted that proper names (such as Aquinas) and other nouns (such as deontology) were not always rendered properly. Candidates are reminded that the technical vocabulary of ethics needs to be learnt and mastered.

Stronger responses referred directly to the question, and kept returning to the question throughout. They introduced the ethical topic briefly, succinctly, and effectively. Structure was very tight including use of topic sentence, evidence and analysis, and a definitive conclusion.

Weaker responses lacked structure and did not directly refer to the question. Weaker responses had weak spelling and grammatical errors and were difficult to understand due to poor structure and syntax. Many of these responses spent too much time defining and describing abortion, euthanasia, etc., which, whilst demonstrating they understood the issue itself, did not answer the demands of the question. Utilitarian responses had a lack of correct understanding of the theory with confusion between act and rule utilitarianism and incorrect application of the Hedonic Calculus to Rule Utilitarianism.

Criterion 4
Criterion 4 reminds students to supply evidence to bolster, confirm, question and critically interrogate each ethical theory as applied to the topic at hand; stronger responses provided quotations (with suitable if basic citations) and examples that could then be used to support and develop the argumentation employed.

Strong responses used an evidence-based approach to their argument. Some very good responses brought in external sources to support their argument, either in terms of demonstrating the strengths or weaknesses of a theory.

A large number of weaker responses lacked explicit evidence.
Criterion 5
Criterion 5 required students to demonstrate not merely their knowledge of the differences and similarities between two different ethical theories, but also their reasoned evaluation of the perceived strengths and weaknesses of each. More could have been said about the problems, limitations and difficulties in application of different ethical approaches, as well as their more appealing aspects by candidates this year.

Stronger responses made great use of their evidence sources, and unpacked them to support arguments on the stances taken by theories, by explaining how a particular piece of evidence demonstrated a specific element of theory, and how the theories demonstrated a particular world view. Discussions on the similarities and differences were explicit and evidence based.

A number of weaker responses lacked any critical evaluation of evidence or theories, and made no evaluation of similarities and differences of theories.