

Message from Stephen Wright to all taught theology students, August 2020

Greetings to you all in the middle of a hot summer. I hope that you all have enjoyed, or will enjoy, a good break at some point in what continues to be a very demanding period for everyone.

We wanted to record this message to you to let you know how we are responding to the feedback on your units of study from last semester and update you on plans for the new academic year. We reviewed the feedback at a joint meeting of the Undergraduate and Postgraduate Programme Committees, at which unit tutors and student representatives were present, on 7th July, and followed this up with discussions about the practicalities of teaching next semester at a teaching staff meeting on 9th July. Feedback on the PMP programme was reviewed at a separate meeting on 14th July

The second semester 2019-20 will certainly go down in all our memories as a new and challenging experience for everyone, students and tutors alike. We are very grateful for your patience as we adjusted to new ways of working. We also want to congratulate you on your achievements. Despite all the disadvantages against which we were struggling, not least the lack of access to the library, it was very encouraging to note at our July Progression and Awards Board how many students were achieving their normal grades or higher, without any need to have them raised in accordance with the No Disadvantage Policy. We look forward to celebrating with those who received awards when we are able to gather for a graduation ceremony again, we hope sometime in 2021.

Much of the feedback that we received on the units related to the digital mode of delivery and our plan for continuing with such a mode in the first semester of 2020-21 in the Digital Education Framework released in July constitutes our main response to that feedback. In particular we have noted the need for greater clarity and consistency of expectation between units regarding what we are offering to you and how we are expecting students to participate.

Please look at the Digital Education Framework if you have not already done so. Let me just highlight some key points about the delivery of our teaching from September.

Each undergraduate unit will be timetabled within the normal periods and will include prerecorded and 'live' elements. These will be clearly set out in a unit schedule which the tutor will make available on Moodle prior to the start of the semester. Timings will be given for the 'live' elements, for example in the first period of the day (8.30-10.20) there might be one 'live' element, such as a Q & A by Zoom might from 9.45 – 10.15 a.m. The prerecorded element (no more than 40 minutes, which may include pauses for activity or reflection on specific points) can either be accessed during the previous week, or within the overall timetabled slot (for example, in the first period of the day, you might listen to it from 8.30-9.10). We hope that this will allow the right balance of flexibility and predictability so that, for instance, those part-time students who have to engage with their studies on just one day of the week will be able to do so, while those who struggle with consistent internet access will be able to spread them out through the week. We also want to try to ensure that everyone gets plenty of screen breaks.

Postgraduate units will also have a unit schedule and will mainly consist of seminars conducted by Zoom, which seemed to work well during the last semester.

Tutors are working on assignment titles and bibliographies at the moment to ensure that your learning for each unit can be assessed fairly on the basis of resources that are available in some digital form, while we await news of when and how the library might be safely re-opened.

We will be monitoring attendance and engagement through your participation in the live sessions. We will regularly review the process of digital teaching and learning as staff through the coming semester to help ensure that your learning experience is as full and satisfying as possible.

Other matters raised in the unit feedback, together with our responses, can be summarised as follows.

1. Some students have found navigation of material on Moodle difficult. In response, we have asked all tutors to check their own unit material to ensure that it is easy to access and that outdated material is hidden or removed. Seidel Abel Boanerges is our academic link for the oversight of Moodle and he and I will be liaising to guide tutors as required. We recognise that the PMP units are particularly complex, and a process is underway to streamline the Moodle material for these. I will also be taking an overview of the arrangement of the Moodle material not specific to particular units, for example that on academic administration, to see how we can improve the clarity of the overall organisation. I would stress that all these things are our responsibility as academic staff and we are extremely grateful to our professional staff colleagues, not least Joanna Zaplotna, for their efficient and willing support in the day-to-day running of our Virtual Learning Environment.
2. We recognise that all of us as tutors need further training in digital education. We began this process with our annual training day involving our online tutors in May. Over the summer, our Deputy Director of Operations Katie Jack is offering targeted training on technical aspects of e-learning, especially using the Panopto, Zoom and Moodle platforms. We are also planning to invite an expert from another institution to do a training session early in the autumn on exploiting the potential of such platforms academically.
3. Some students also requested further training on technical issues, for example on varying the speed on Panopto recordings, and we will be working on producing one or more training videos as required.
4. The online response rate for unit feedback this semester was much lower than usual, just a quarter of all students. We recognise that we did not always allow 'live' time for completing feedback this semester, as we would when physically in class. We will ensure that we allow such time at the end of the first semester 2020/21. We also recognise that students need more guidance about what kind of feedback is most helpful, and teaching staff will agree how best to provide this guidance before the end of the semester. We will also revise the feedback form to reflect more fully the mode of digital education. Some

students would also like an opportunity to give interim feedback in the middle of the unit and I will be liaising with colleagues about the best way to implement this practically.

5. Some concern was raised about the use and quality of outside facilitators in PMP1 and 2. In light of this and because of the mode of delivery in semester 1 2020-21, use of such facilitators will be kept to a minimum, with more of the programme - especially those sessions that have to do with the acquisition of ministerial skills (particularly at PMP1) – delivered by internal staff.

6. Two other specific questions which I am following up with relevant colleagues are whether it is possible for those taking online language exams to have a 'time left' warning as they would in a physical classroom, and whether it is possible for students who are just 'auditing' a unit to give online feedback as well as those taking it for credit.

Finally, we are grateful for all the encouraging feedback we received on various aspects of the programme, including:

- the end of year block weeks for PMP
- the flexibility to set a different assignment when the alternative placement could not happen because of lockdown
- proactive approaches by tutors to engaging with classes during lockdown
- helpful reading suggestions and tutor availability

Specific areas of good practice highlighted were the non-judgemental approach taken when students' opinions differed from the tutor's, and the helpfulness of having two tutors with contrasting preaching styles delivering a preaching unit. Please be assured that we will continue to seek to build on these strengths and address the weaknesses noted over the coming year.

We look forward very much to seeing everyone again, at least in digital form, towards the end of September. Katie Walsh in Registry will already have been in touch with you about your programme and timetable for the coming academic year, and any options you need to choose, so do contact her if you have any queries about this. I do hope you enjoy the rest of your summer.

Stephen Wright
August 2020