

VALIDATION QUESTION 4

What forms of assessment are most appropriate for determining the suitability of candidates to begin the exercise of these ministries?

1 Introduction

Sydney Smith is quoted in Lady Holland's Memoir as follows: "Among the smaller duties of life I hardly know any one more important than that of not praising where praise is not due." We might think Smith's observation to be harsh, but equally one might sometimes think that the pendulum has swung so much in the direction of affirmation and praise, that one's sympathy with Smith somewhat increases.

In order to properly address the question we need to break down the nature and the form of the assessment which is appropriate and then apply it to Wycliffe. Thus one approach might be as follows:

- *Academic* assessment - which must be academically rigorous and may involve formal external examination or moderation
- *Ministerial and spiritual assessment* - which must be relevant to the needs of both church and candidate and involves the exercise of spiritual judgement

Each of these approaches is likely to use a combination of objective criteria and subjective judgements, consultative approaches, self-evaluation and so on. Each has their role to play; the key lies in the forming of the right judgements at the right level and being willing to act upon them. To some of these issues we will return subsequently.

2 Academic assessment

Academic assessment has traditionally taken the form of either written examination and/or a combination of internally and externally marked pieces of work. The key elements could be suggested as follows:

- Agreed criteria for allocating marks
- External examination/marking, at least in part
- A moderation process to ensure consistency

Clearly there are other forms of assessment that could be used; peer marking, attendance at lectures, class participation and seminar presentation, to give some examples. Some of these aspects of assessment are in use at Wycliffe but on a strictly academic basis the Hall follows the basic criteria set down by the University. The marking schemes employed are included in the course handbooks, which are, of course, made available to all students.

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In a little more detail, the main academic programmes which go to make up the various courses at Wycliffe are assessed using both internal and external evaluation. Each course requires either 4 pieces of internal work (essays or similar of around 2500 words) or, in certain circumstances, 3 pieces of work and certified attendance at the course of lectures. Each of these pieces of work is marked by the tutor who taught the course and allocated a mark according to the set marking scheme. For the Bachelor of Theology and Certificate of Theology courses (and indeed for the BA which is taught across the University tutorial system) these are the classic criteria of First Class, Upper Second, Lower Second, Third etc. A First requires original thought, the highest level of evaluation, coherent argument and including all of the major arguments concerned. A first is allocated a mark of 70% or more, an upper second, 60-69% etc.

A different marking scheme applies to the Oxford Diploma in Ministry. Although the internal assessment is based on the same principle, the assessed pieces of work are normally more practically orientated. So, for example, rather than an essay on 'Assess and evaluate Cranmer's mature eucharistic doctrine,' an ODM candidate might be invited to "Prepare a Lent Talk on Thomas Cranmer and his contribution to the development of Anglicanism." The latter might well include slides, presentations, audio, video etc.

The University validated courses then require either a written examination (in certain subjects, Old Testament, New Testament, Ethics) or a long, 5-7,000 word externally assessed essay. It is the external mark for this essay which determines the final mark for the paper. The title has to be agreed in draft with the Examiners, and a declaration signed by student, tutor and college officer that the internal requirements have been met. The ODM is internally marked and then externally moderated by two moderators who provide a written report and meet with all tutors to report their findings in terms of content, teaching and consistency.

Another aspect which should be mentioned is the question of *feedback*. This is provided in a number of ways, through written comments on all essays, through occasional course meetings, a student studies representative feeding into the Board of Studies, and through tutors working with students on the choice of long essay titles.

There are two particular issues which emerge from this review of assessment and criteria. Firstly, the proposals for the reform of the Certificate in Theology and the Oxford Diploma in Ministry. Secondly, the question of the marking scheme used for the ODM. These are both picked up in section 5 below.

3 Ministerial and spiritual assessment

Assessment and evaluation of candidates for ordination specifically in the areas of ministerial and spiritual formation offer a wider scope for a range of assessment methods. However, given the essentially spiritual nature of the divine office to which candidates are called, these aspects are equally if, in some ways, not more important than the purely academic assessment criteria. This is also an area where sound judgement is required alongside objective criteria.

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It is worth pausing and reflecting upon the nature of the matters which are being assessed. They fall into two criteria; *ministerial competences* (which can probably be assessed in some way by a range of objective criteria) and *spiritual formation and growth*, which can perhaps be measured in some ways, but is much more subjective. There will, inevitably, be some grey areas. To give one example from Wycliffe, can, should and if so, how, should a student sermon be assessed? That particular question will be returned to shortly, for the present it serves as an example. The other factor worth mentioning in respect of ministerial competences is a recognition of *scope*. The college may not be able or even the best place to consider the competence of a candidate in taking a funeral, for example. The development of that competency properly belongs in the curacy. However, what the college can assess is potential, awareness of issues, of self-awareness, teachability etc.

To turn first of all to ministerial competencies. Formally, these are assessed primarily through placement reports (externally) and evaluation of, for example, sermons generally, and specifically funeral sermons (internally). The specific range of skills experienced and worked on by the candidate during training will depend on a range of factors, including prior experience, interest, calling and the nature of placements undertaken. The role of the tutor is to exercise an oversight to ensure that the candidates skill or potential is developed across an appropriately broad range of experience and opportunity. Every student who undertakes a placement receives a written report from the Supervisor. The Supervisor receives an information pack and guidance from the college and the Director of Christian Leadership meets with placement supervisors. Similarly for missions, every mission is led by a Wycliffe tutor who writes a report for each student. Sermons are assessed (for clarity, exegesis etc) by tutors who go out to local churches to listen to students, film them and then report; the video also being followed up by the Trainer in Voice Production. The students themselves as part of the curriculum also have to write a reflection upon their main placement. All of these elements go towards the development of a profile of potential and gift which then feed into the process of reporting and recommending for ordination.

Most important, and, of course, difficult to measure are the matters of spiritual formation, growth and development. Candidates are expected to have a formal approach to spiritual discipline. Some of this is corporate, some individual. In essence every candidate for ordination is expected to engage with spirituality, first, academically by completing the necessary course on Spirituality and its assignments, and secondly, personally, through the development of spiritual self-awareness and discipline. The guided element here is through the Spiritual Formation for Leadership course which involves a significant amount of guided self-awareness, assessment and reflection. If candidates do not undertake this course, then we expect some formal alternative, which might involve a regular meeting with an external person. Many students have spiritual directors, soul friends, mentors, accountability groups and this is actively encouraged.

In terms of assessment, what the tutors look for, both individually and corporately is that ordinands are self-aware, developing patterns of spiritual discipline and showing signs of spiritual maturity. Many will do this through traditional means (bible reading, prayer), others will develop new or different models from what they have been used to. At the heart of assessing this lies the tutors meeting and the individual meetings of tutor and ordinand. The Tutor in Prayer, Spirituality and Mission as well as giving significant individual time to the spiritual formation of students, also guides the tutors in discussion in terms of awareness of the spiritual development or issues affecting individual students.

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This leads neatly to the next section on reporting, where in the formal reports to sponsoring bishops, academic assessment and formational assessment have to be brought together.

4 Reporting

In terms of overall assessment of candidates as 'fit for ordination' there cannot be complete reliance on either academic or formational assessment. Rather the two elements need to be brought together alongside the experienced judgement of a tutor and of the college corporately in making a recommendation to the sponsoring Bishop for ordination. The current reporting regime has strengths and weaknesses. The format of reports provided by the Ministry Division are clear and helpful. However, some observations of the system are these:

- An implicit encouragement and tendency to be bland in reporting
- Less than clear encouragement to set out weaknesses and issues for further work
- A presumption of recommendation for ordination

The Principal, after three years at Wycliffe, in observing the operation of the system internally, would add another couple of observations:

- A tendency for reports to be 'student driven'
- Student negotiation over the content
- Blandness from the tutors

As a consequence of this the Hall has somewhat revamped its approach to reporting on students, although there are still some aspects which the Ministry Division could assist with. The new approach at Wycliffe is as follows:

- *The tutors accepting that their key corporate role is the oversight of the formation and development of the students.*

This may seem axiomatic but if this responsibility is to be properly exercised, it means that other business must not occupy the tutors time and attention. This then links in to the management reforms in Wycliffe where operational decision-making has been delegated to teams. This has released the tutors corporately to spend the bulk of their time when all together discussing and monitoring individual students, often going through students by fellowship group led by the relevant tutor. This has been a very welcome development. It increases the likelihood of issues being raised with candidates at an early stage and the college as a corporate body being aware of them.

- *Students complete a self-evaluation form but the report is written by the tutor*

This is an approach introduced this year for the first time in an attempt to deal with student driven or student negotiated reports. By inviting the student to undertake a separate self-evaluation, this information and insight is then available to the Tutor for writing the report, but the two documents are kept separate.

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The outstanding issues, and we return to these briefly in the next section, are dealing with specific weaknesses, confidential communication, and the presumption of ordination. It is the developments in terms of data protection, such that there is now no official confidential communication between college and Bishop as all comments are disclosable to the student.

5 Issues for future consideration

There are three aspects of assessment of candidates which deserve being drawn out for highlighting and on-going discussion.

5.1 *Revision of the Certificate of Theology and Oxford Diploma in Ministry*

The review of Permanent Private Halls asked for PPHs to teach only courses validated by the University of Oxford. A particular issue was the existence for ordinands primarily at St Stephen's House and at Wycliffe of the unvalidated Diploma. A previous attempt to develop an alternative to the ODM, the BMin proposals had floundered in 2005-06 for a variety of reasons - not least of which was the University's lack of confidence in the rather all-embracing nature of the BMin in terms of both participants and teachers. There was little enthusiasm from all parties to pursue such a major undertaking again. However, it was clear that there was the opportunity to deal with the PPH recommendation and abolish the Diploma by a reform of the Certificate in Theology. This has involved proposals to increase the distinction between the *degree* and the *certificate* but in doing so, permit the abolition of the Diploma. The teaching for degree, certificate and diploma has always been common and to a consistent, syllabus. What has been different are the methods of assessment between, on the one hand, degree and certificate, and on the other, the diploma.

The proposals, which it is hoped will be in place for 2009-10, are, in essence, very simple. By amending the regulations of the Certificate to permit assessment to be by long essay rather than written examination a number of objectives are achieved:

- The Certificate is given a greater status in its own right
- The need for a separate Diploma is removed
- The PPH recommendation is largely met
- The overall standard is enhanced with external examination

These are important and significant proposals which have been approved by the Supervisory Committee and the Faculty Board and await final approval from the relevant University Committee and Council.

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5.2 The marking scheme for the Diploma

On one level this is a minor point, and which will be redundant if the above reforms proceed. However, it is illustrative of some problems with the Diploma which, if the above reforms were not to be enacted, would require attention. The Diploma marking scheme is essentially too generous! An 'excellent' mark is 85%+ and a 'good' mark is 70-85%. These bands are set too high and are too broad. There is a general expectation of being marked not less than 70% and in addition to that, 70% is not necessarily that good a mark! All of this leads to unrealistic expectations and students seeking to object to any mark below 70%, hence a tendency of tutors to 'mark up.' This is a matter which requires some attention.

5.2 Reporting issues

The key matters of (a) recording weaknesses and issues for candidates, (b) dealing with confidential communication to bishops and (c) the question of recommendation/non-recommendation for ordination are all important issues. In each of these it might be that further dialogue between the colleges, the House of Bishops and the Ministry Division would be fruitful. In particular we wonder if the reporting forms should be more specific in terms of stating a minimum of two matters on which the candidate should work in the coming year (on first year and penultimate year reforms) and perhaps also whether these matters could be a potential block to a recommendation for ordination. If matters of concern are not noted in tutorial interviews and recorded as appropriate on the reporting forms at an early stage then it becomes very difficult to raise them subsequently. We wonder also whether the penultimate and final year reports should not have a specific box dealing with the recommendation, or otherwise, of the candidate for ordination.

6 Conclusions

A wide range of assessment and evaluation methods are used, both formal and informal. Clearly there needs to be a significant amount of external assessment as well as internal assessment and the exercise of judgement. The essential and foundational role of the 'tutors' is to bring together in their assessment of a candidate their own insight and judgement under God, of academic, spiritual and ministerial preparedness for the exercise of ordained ministry in the Church of England. That is the essential judgement and all methods, styles, approaches, skill and potential, reports, forms, essays etc., have to be brought together in one place for the exercise of an essentially spiritual judgement of recommendation for ordination.

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July 2008