

Brief overview of the Sheffield Report

“Formation for Ministry and a framework for Higher Education Validation - Phase 2 Report”

This document raises a few questions and concerns with the Sheffield report which suggest why it may need further discussion than Synod has timetabled.¹

The Report

- a. 16 months ago the government announced changes in funding for Higher Education. Ministry Council established a working party to look at the impact for Theological Training. (paragraph 1)
- b. The Working party see this as an opportunity to implement what they think are much needed changes to Training. (91)
- c. The key proposal is to centralise training so the majority of Ordinands, Readers and Curates are trained on a single suite of awards, with a single common syllabus. (9)
- d. The Report suggests that there will be a number of benefits – mainly that it will be simpler and more coherent.²
- e. The Report wants Synod (6-9th Feb) to commit to a timeframe to implement these changes. In 18 months the common syllabus will be introduced. By 2015 every training institution will have moved onto the awards.³ (53)

¹ Report available at [http://churchofengland.org/media/1386203/gs%20misc%201008%20-%20higher%20education%20frunding%20changes%20\(phase%202\).pdf](http://churchofengland.org/media/1386203/gs%20misc%201008%20-%20higher%20education%20frunding%20changes%20(phase%202).pdf)

² The benefits are listed as Common standards of Formation (para.s 13-16); Simplicity (17-19); Coherence (20-22); Definition (23-25); Partnership (26-27); responsiveness (28-30); Establishing a negotiating position. (37-39)

³ The Report does allow colleges to apply for exemption so they can remain independent. Those criteria require in particular that the institution is connected to a centre of excellence for the study of Theology, in essence a world-renowned secular Theology Faculty. (63) On the Church of England website it is acknowledged that this means Oxford and Cambridge: <http://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2012/01/agenda-for-february-2012-general-synod.aspx>

Questions the report raises:

- a. Synod is being asked to commit to a single syllabus without knowing what that syllabus will be, or asking whether it is possible to construct a single syllabus that is appropriate to the breadth of traditions in the Church.
- b. Despite the assurances of paragraph (8) the common syllabus will almost inevitably be 'middle of the road'. How can it be faithful to the perspectives of anglo-catholic, charismatic or conservative evangelical theologies? It would thus remove the possibility of any ordinand receiving a training which is faithful to their tradition or theological convictions.
- c. The intention of the report reaches beyond what it appears to be on a cursory glance. The committee was established to address the financial implications of changes to government funding for Higher Education (a net loss of £1.5 million p.a.), and the agenda item for General Synod regards the report as concerned with funding. The report's introduction (1, 2) also opens the report with this urgent concern. This context could lead to the misunderstanding that the motivation of the report is merely financial, yet this is not the case as paragraph 37 states: "It is important to recognise that part (but only part) of the motivation for developing the common suite of awards is financial." Instead paragraphs 13-39 as a whole make clear that its ambition is a wholesale overhaul of theological training. This requires both more prolonged discussion than the current timetable (para 53) has provided for, and wider consultation than the short life-span of the committee has made possible.
- d. A final question is whether the proposed changes will actually deliver the needed savings. It is unclear from the report how detailed the costing has been. Paragraph 66 states: "we envisage that the total cost to the church of England will be not more than present costs... and we hope that savings can be made overall." It may be ambitious to hope that a single administrator can manage the workload generated by these changes (65). Further, experience of such centralisation in other spheres suggests that there will be many unforeseen costs (bureaucracy, publications, communications).