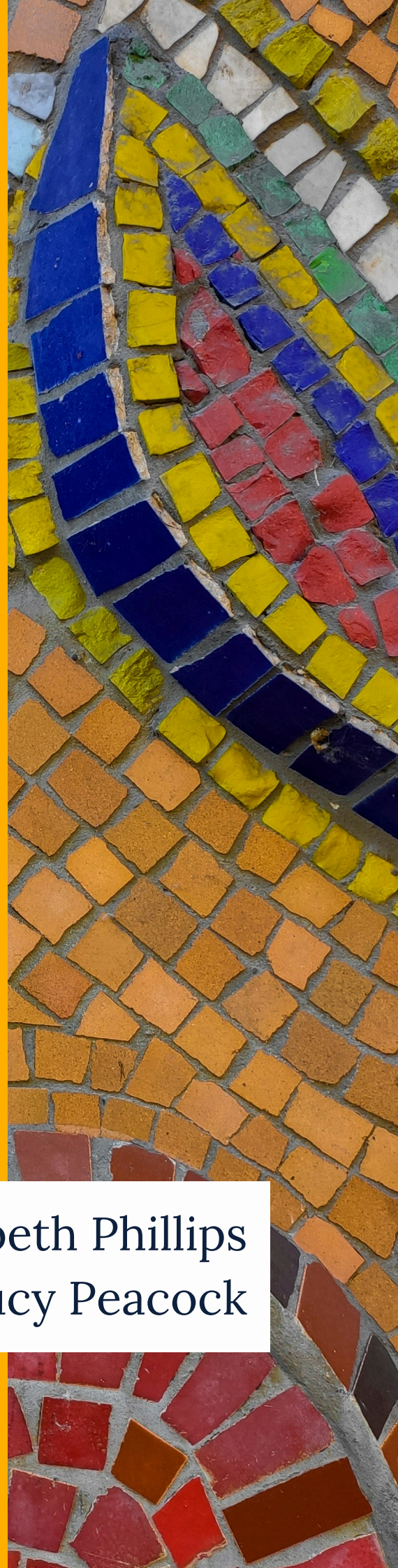




Interfaith Encounter in Theological Education

*Responding theologically to
recent empirical research*

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I. Introduction

Elizabeth Phillips and Lucy Peacock

Recent research has highlighted the importance of attention to religious diversity in contexts of theological education, calling on theological educators to enhance opportunities for interfaith encounter. This project explores interfaith encounter in theological education through a new analysis of the data behind the Coventry University report, *Interfaith Learning in Christian and Muslim Higher Education Colleges* (2025), and through theological-pedagogical reflection on the implications of the findings for the contexts of Durham Common Awards TEIs (theological education institutions). The Coventry project reported on the current realities of interfaith learning, experiences, attitudes, and impacts in a wide sample of Christian and Muslim HE contexts in the UK, and made a set of recommendations arising from these findings.¹

The project sought to better understand a) how to create a positive college climate for religious diversity, b) how to foster intra- and interfaith engagement between students and between staff and students, and c) how to better support Christian and Muslim students (and those with other worldviews) while they study at college. The research team, lead by Professor Kristin Aune, share a background in projects exploring equality, inclusion and religious diversity in higher education. They identified that colleges are significantly overlooked in academic research, despite being places in which future religious leaders are prepared for life and ministry in a religiously diverse society. Through mixed methods (survey research with 437 college students and 34 student and staff interviews), the project was the first of its kind, culminating in the report, [*Interfaith Learning in Christian and Muslim Higher Education Colleges* \(2025\)](#). The report details the findings from the survey as well as three case studies of colleges where 34 interviews were conducted, and it offers recommendations on how colleges and those working with them can maximise opportunities for interfaith engagement, and ensure a welcoming environment for the whole college community and those visiting.

We asked what theological educators in Common Awards TEIs need to learn from this recent research. We began with a new analysis of the project data, isolating the results from Common Awards TEIs. We presented this data to a group of educators in these institutions, and gathered their reflections. Then we worked within our own TEI, the Cambridge Theological Federation, to reflect on the implications for our particular context and practice.

Throughout the project, we also asked what might be gained (or lost) from considering interfaith encounter in relation to, or as an aspect of, diversity and inclusion initiatives within theological education. Religious diversity is often overlooked in many diversity and inclusion efforts, particularly in single-faith contexts such as Christian theological education. Yet good relations in society between people of different beliefs is crucial to the common good, understanding of other faith

¹ Kristin Aune, Hafza Iqbal, Lucy Peacock, and Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor, *Interfaith Learning in Christian and Muslim Higher Education Colleges* (Coventry University, 2025), p. 14.

communities is crucial to Christian presence in local contexts, and knowledge of Christian relations with other faiths is crucial to understanding Christian history, thought, and practice (especially, but not only, in relation to Judaism). How, then, should religious diversity be approached within Christian theological education?

Thus, the objectives and questions that drove this research were as follows:

Project Objectives:

1. To respond to the findings and recommendations of the recent project, [*Interfaith Learning in Christian and Muslim Higher Education Colleges \(2025\)*](#)
2. To focus analysis of and reflection on the findings to addressing the particular context of Durham Common Awards TEIs
3. To reflect theologically and pedagogically on current and possible practice of interfaith encounter within TEIs
4. To address the gap in attention to religious diversity within the inclusion initiatives in the Common Awards

Project Research Questions:

1. What can Common Awards TEIs learn from recent research on interfaith learning and experiences in theological education?
2. What might be gained (or lost) from considering interfaith encounter in relation to, or as an aspect of diversity and inclusion initiatives within theological education?
3. What possibilities and recommendations for interfaith encounter in TEIs arise from analysis of and reflection on these findings and considerations?

The following report begins with the empirical data, set in the context of some previous studies. We then consider implications of this data for the contexts of Durham Common Awards TEI's (as recorded in our Roundtable Discussion Event) and in the specific TEI of the Cambridge Theological Federation (as recorded in our Reflective Practice Event). Finally, these reflections on the data are brought into conversation with wider literature on encountering other faiths in Christian theological education and on theological education pedagogy more broadly.

The report concludes with a set of recommendations arising from the project, including recommendations for theological educators, for Common Awards TEIs, and for the Durham Common Awards centrally.

II. Empirical Data

Previous Studies

Elizabeth Phillips

The Coventry study, [*Interfaith Learning in Christian and Muslim Higher Education Colleges \(2025\)*](#), is relatively unique in its focus, scope, and depth. As background to our reflections on that study, we should also consider at least four key projects since 2000 relating to interfaith encounter in theological education in the UK.

Ministerial Formation in a Multi-Faith Society (2003)

In this early study, Sophie Gilliat-Ray noted that there had been several calls for Christian theological education in England to prepare students for multi-faith society, citing All Faiths for One Race in 1981, George Carey in 1995, Philip Lewis in 2001.² She studied all Church of England TEIs, apart from one, at that time, using long surveys, internal documents, and interviews with students, staff, and principals. She found the three key determinants in whether a TEI was preparing students for multi-faith society were (1) presence of an individual with interfaith expertise, either on staff or an actively involved interfaith advisor, (2) geographical location in or near populations of other faiths, and (3) the support and involvement of the TEI's principal.³ Further, she concluded that there were six 'crucial ingredients to good learning about other faiths':

- 'Personal encounter' with people of other faiths.
- 'Prior preparation for ordinands' in advance of encounters.
- 'Prior preparation by tutors' to carefully identify, plan, and prepare for encounters.
- 'Group size' of 5-10 students as ideal for encounters.
- And 'giving students choices' that respect their concerns and meet them where they are in their understandings of religious diversity.⁴

² Sophie Gilliat-Ray, *Ministerial Formation in a Multi-Faith Society* (University of Leeds, 2003), p. 9. Within this text, Gilliat-Ray cites *Blind Leaders for the Blind: Theological Training in Today's Plural Society*, ed. by David Jennings, Christine Trethowan, and Kenneth Cracknell (Birmingham: All Faiths for One Race, 1981); George Carey, 'Address to AMAR/UNESCO Conference' (Cairo, 6 December 1995); and Philip Lewis, 'A Lesson for Thwackum', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 18 May 2001.

³ Gilliat-Ray, *Ministerial Formation*, p. 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

The study found that interfaith encounter was ‘one of the most significant elements of their training’ for some participants.

Many students come away from their encounter with multi-faith Britain with fresh insights into their own faith, a better appreciation of what it might be like to be in a minority situation, and transferable skills that could be put to use in a wide variety of pastoral contexts.⁵

Many students expressed most interest in encounters not focused on interfaith dialogue or religious practice, ‘preferring instead to meet people from other traditions within the context of locality, such as in schools, through mutual hospitality, and over the counter in local shops’ or through community organisations in which multiple faith communities found ‘areas of common concern in the locality, working together on issues such as racism, violence, and other areas for community action’.⁶

However, many students’ expectations and interests were not met by their TEIs.

Although most institutions refer to religious diversity in their self-introductory statements, in some instances it was clear that the extent of compulsory training was perceived as inadequate by ordinands themselves, suggesting a mismatch of unrealistic mutual expectations.⁷

The Training of Religious Leaders in the UK (2008)

The Woolf Institute did previous research into theological education, surveying Jewish, Christian, and Muslim TEIs. Michael Mumisa and Edward Kessler concluded that (at that time) most interfaith modules in Christian TEIs were optional rather than required, but that most TEIs included interfaith activities in their wider programme of training. They found differing approaches related to theological traditions: ‘more evangelical colleges tend to prefer courses taught from a Christian-centred theological perspective with the primary purpose of evangelising’ whereas ‘more liberal colleges prefer to teach other religions with the primary purpose of promoting understanding and dialogue.’⁸ And they found many TEI staff wanted to decrease interfaith teaching and learning, arguing that ‘more time should be spent studying our own Christian faith.’⁹

⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

⁸ Michael Mumisa and Edward Kessler, *The Training of Religious Leaders in the UK: a survey of Jewish, Christian and Muslim seminaries*, (Woolf Institute, 2008), p. 3.

⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

Integrating Islam (2012)

Looking specifically at the teaching of Islam within Christian theological education, a study by the Oxford Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies used online questionnaires, interviews, and analysis of curricula in 46 TEIs. Richard McCallum found that only 9 of these reported that ‘it is still possible for a student to graduate having received no teaching on Islam whatsoever.’¹⁰ However, teaching related to Islam stood apart from the curriculum, and integration across the curriculum was not being discussed at most TEIs. Most cited already ‘overcrowded curricula’ as the key obstacle to more teaching on Islam, but the majority of TEIs prioritised some type of encounter with ‘an occasional Muslim speaker’, a ‘visit to a mosque’ or some other facilitated ‘interaction with Muslims.’¹¹

Interfaith Engagement and Theological Education (2016)

Ray Gaston and Kat Brealey created a collaboration between The Queen’s Foundation and Presence and Engagement to conduct a detailed overview of interfaith modules in Church of England TEIs. They defined interfaith engagement (IFE) as follows:

Inter Faith Engagement (IFE) is an integrative and interdisciplinary component of theological education that engages with the increasing reality of our ‘multi-faith conscious society’. Using this definition, IFE in its broadest sense recognises that the issue is not simply confined to diverse areas which can be statistically defined as ‘Multi-Faith’ or ‘Presence and Engagement’ parishes. Important though that is, IFE expands the meaning of engagement by examining the implications for the ministry of the Church to a culture that increasingly acknowledges the reality of our religiously plural society.¹²

They found that in 21 TEIs, 13 offered Common Awards modules on IFE, and 10 of these were compulsory. The other 8 TEIs covered IFE in compulsory offerings outside the curriculum, or in modules on either mission or contextual theology. Half of the TEIs were drawing on external interfaith centres and/or personal contacts for interfaith provision, and the authors concluded that, ‘While it is positive that TEIs are able to draw on local resources in this way, it should be noted that arranging teaching through personal contacts can mean that these connections are lost when the member of staff responsible for IFE moves on.’¹³ They also concluded that resourcing IFE was particularly challenging in rural areas and with dispersed cohorts, and suggested that more well-resourced TEIs (e.g. in Oxford and Cambridge) could collaborate with other TEIs.¹⁴ They reported

¹⁰ Richard McCallum, *Integrating Islam: a report on the teaching of Islam within Theological colleges in the British Isles* (Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies Oxford, 2012), p. 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

¹² Ray Gaston and Kat Brealey, *Interfaith Engagement and Theological Education* (Presence & Engagement, 2016), p. 2-3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

on some TEIs use of the Oxford Muslim-Christian Summer School, and a Buddy Scheme initiated between The Queen's Foundation and Leo Baeck College, concluding, 'while exchanges and summer schools may provide a good opportunity for this, they should not be seen as a way for the TEI to abdicate responsibility for their students' learning in this area.'¹⁵ The [Presence and Engagement](#) website still includes some recommended resources arising from this project.

The project also included a conference on 'Inter Faith Engagement and Theological Education', and the proceedings were included in the report. Staff from TEIs who participated in discussions were reported to have 'expressed scepticism about the value of teaching the content of other faiths, feeling it to be more important to teach Christian approaches towards those of other faiths.'¹⁶ They expressed concerns about how to provide IFE for online students, about lack of budgets for paying interfaith centres for input, and about limited teaching time within modules. Some 'proposed that it might be better to do formational or "experiential" teaching on IFE outside of the modular system, seeing the modules as being more geared towards academic content.'¹⁷ Finally, one participant warned against the 'the dangers of the "tourist" nature of placements', discouraging one-off engagements that 'use local people for their projects' rather than showing 'they are committed to their context'. This participant, for example, 'felt that she wouldn't take students to visit a mosque, but she would instead introduce them to Muslim people who might then invite them.'¹⁸

Key takeaways

Across these four studies in the UK context, a few key insights emerge:

- There is a wide consensus on the importance of education about other faiths and opportunities for interfaith encounter in Christian theological education.
- There is also widespread lack of integration of interfaith within theological education.
- Students in theological education expect and appreciate interfaith opportunities.
- There is considerable resistance within TEIs to deeper integration and/or wider opportunities for interfaith encounter, whether for theological reasons, logistical concerns, or considerations of resource.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 48.

New Data Analysis

Lucy Peacock

Introduction

The first phase of the Interfaith Encounter in Theological Education project was a new data analysis of a survey dataset created in 2023 by researchers at Coventry University for the project, *Interfaith learning in Christian and Muslim higher education colleges*. The project reported on the current realities of interfaith learning, experiences, attitudes, and impacts in a wide sample of Christian and Muslim religious college contexts in the UK, and made a set of recommendations arising from these findings.¹⁹

I conducted fresh analysis on this dataset, guided by three key questions:

1. What do the survey responses from students studying at Common Awards TEIs tell us about their interfaith attitudes and experiences?
2. Are the attitudes and experiences of Common Awards TEI students distinctive? How do they compare with students studying at other Christian TEIs?
3. How do personal and institution-related characteristics influence students' attitudes and experiences, if at all?²⁰

473 students completed the surveys in the 2023-24 academic year, 374 of which attended Christian TEIs. Students were surveyed twice during the year to capture different aspects of their experiences, including their participation in interfaith activities, interfaith attitudes, and the interfaith climate of their TEIs. The definition of 'interfaith' provided in the survey was: "Interfaith" describes the coming together of people or perspectives rooted in different religious, spiritual, or non-religious beliefs.²¹

260 students responded in October-December 2023 (of which 217 were from Christian TEIs – 97 studying at Common Awards TEIs), and 202 in April-June 2024 (of which 180 were from Christian TEIs – 92 studying at Common Awards TEIs). At times in the following analysis, I combine the datasets to form a sample of 374 Christian TEI students. Of these 374, almost half (176, 47.1%)

¹⁹ Aune and others, *Interfaith Learning*.

²⁰ Note, due to the sample sizes presented in Table 1, at times I was unable to accurately test the influence of demographics on students' survey responses. Where findings related to characteristics are reported in this analysis, they are significant at the $p < 0.05$ level (common practice in social sciences research), which means we can be 95% confident that the statistical results did not happen by chance. We must also recognise that there is no national-level data on who studies at these TEIs. In the absence of this data, the Coventry project team was unable to 'weight' the dataset to be nationally representative. This is something to be mindful of when interpreting claims about the experiences of those studying at Common Awards TEIs.

²¹ Aune and others, *Interfaith Learning*, p. 8.

attended a TEI validated under the Common Awards Scheme.²² Of the 17 Common Awards TEIs, 14 of these are represented in the analysis.

Before exploring students' survey responses, it is important to recognise that students at Common Awards TEIs stand out from those at other Christian TEIs in a few key ways. They are more often training for faith leadership (67.8% vs. 47.1%), tend to be older, with very few aged 18–25 (4.1% vs. 31.6%), and are more likely to be women (59.2% vs. 51.8%). They also more often study part-time (53.1% vs. 46.9%). See Table 1 for full demographics.

Table 1: Survey sample demographics for the 2023-24 academic year, comparing students studying at Commons Awards TEIs and those at other Christian TEIs

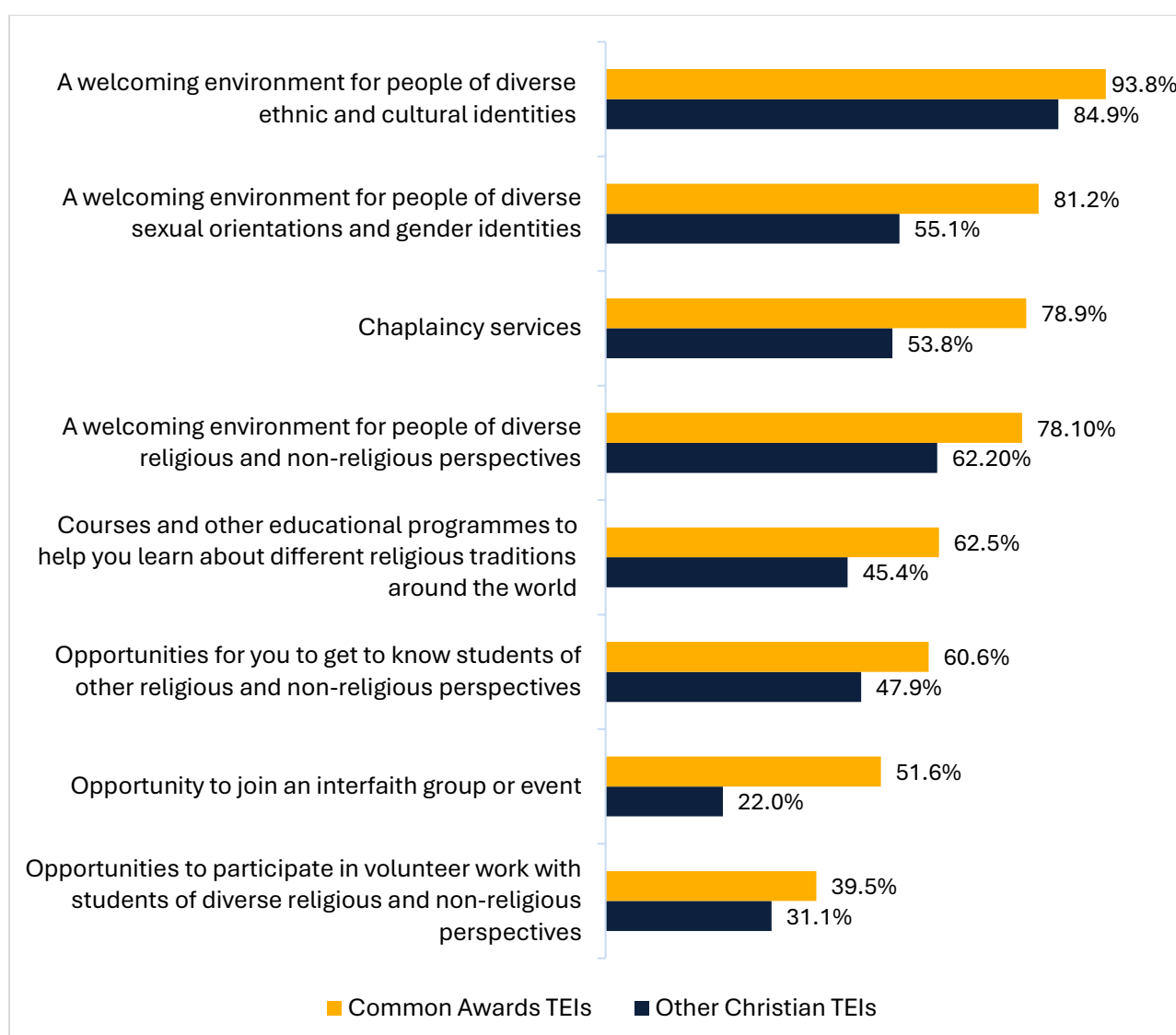
		Commons Awards TEIs	Other Christian TEIs
Institution-related characteristics		%	%
Vocation	Training to be a faith leader	67.8	47.1
	Studying other course or unsure	32.8	52.9
Mode of study	Full-time	39.7	60.3
	Part-time	53.1	46.9
Location of study	Residential	25.0	27.6
	Non-residential	46.0	48.0
	Online	29.0	24.5
Personal characteristics		%	%
Religious perspective	Protestant	94.3	87.4
	Roman Catholic	1.7	5.6
	Orthodox	2.3	3.5
	Latter-day Saints	0.6	0.0
	Non-religious	0.0	0.5
	Other	1.1	1.0
Gender	Male	37.9	46.7
	Female	59.2	51.8
	Other	2.9	1.5
Age	18-25	4.1	31.6
	26-40	27.9	20.4
	41-55	37.2	27.6
	56+	30.8	20.4
Ethnicity	White	83.3	81.0
	Non-white	16.7	19.0
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	80.0	85.6
	LGBTQI+	20.0	14.4

²² Ibid., p. 10. Note, 13 students from Common Awards TEIs completed both surveys. When I present results from the combined dataset (which includes questions asked twice, in both surveys), I have used their second response only, as the most up-to-date record.

Students have high interfaith expectation and participation

The first survey considered what students expect from their TEI. Comparing their expectations with those studying at other Christian TEIs, Common Awards students are more likely to expect their TEIs to provide inclusive environments and opportunities to engage with diversity in its many forms, agreeing in greater proportions than those at other Christian TEIs that all survey items presented in the graph below are 'important' or 'strongly important' to them (see Graph 1). The biggest differences are seen in providing an opportunity to join an interfaith group or event (51.6% vs. 22%), followed by welcoming environments for diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (81.2% vs. 55.1%), and chaplaincy services (78.9% vs. 53.8%). That two of these three are among the *most important* aspects for Common Awards students emphasises how distinctive their expectations are compared to other TEI students.

Graph 1: Percentage of students saying the following are 'important' or 'strongly important' at a TEI, comparing students at Common Awards TEIs with those studying at other Christian TEIs (N=260)



In the second survey, I found that students' high expectations are mostly met. Generally, students studying at Common Awards TEIs report more frequent engagement with religious diversity and interfaith activities than those at other Christian TEIs. Dividing interfaith engagement items into three types: informal, formal, and curricular, I found that Common Awards students are more likely than those studying at other Christian TEIs to take part in all three forms of informal engagement, nine of the 11 forms of formal engagement, and all three forms of curricular engagement (see Graph 2, following page).

The biggest differences between students who attend Common Awards TEIs and those at other Christian TEIs relate to engaging in interfaith or religious diversity training (37.0% vs. 10.2%), attending religious services from traditions not their own (68.5% vs. 44.3%), and going to off-campus events that promote interfaith cooperation (28.3% vs. 6.8%). They are also more likely to attend lectures or panels on religious diversity (38.0% vs. 22.7%) and take part in interfaith activities like dialogue or reflection (56.5% vs. 42.0%).

There are two areas where they are noticeably less involved, however. Fewer Common Awards students report taking part in interfaith social action or volunteering projects (12% vs. 14.8%). They are also slightly less likely to attend formal debates between people of different worldviews (13% vs. 14.8%). Overall, however, the pattern is clear: Common Awards students are more exposed to, and more involved in, opportunities to engage with diverse faiths and worldviews than those studying elsewhere.

Amongst the 92 Common Awards students who responded to this question, vocation proved influential. Those who were training for ordination were statistically significantly more likely than those who were not, to have engaged in the following curricular interfaith activities:

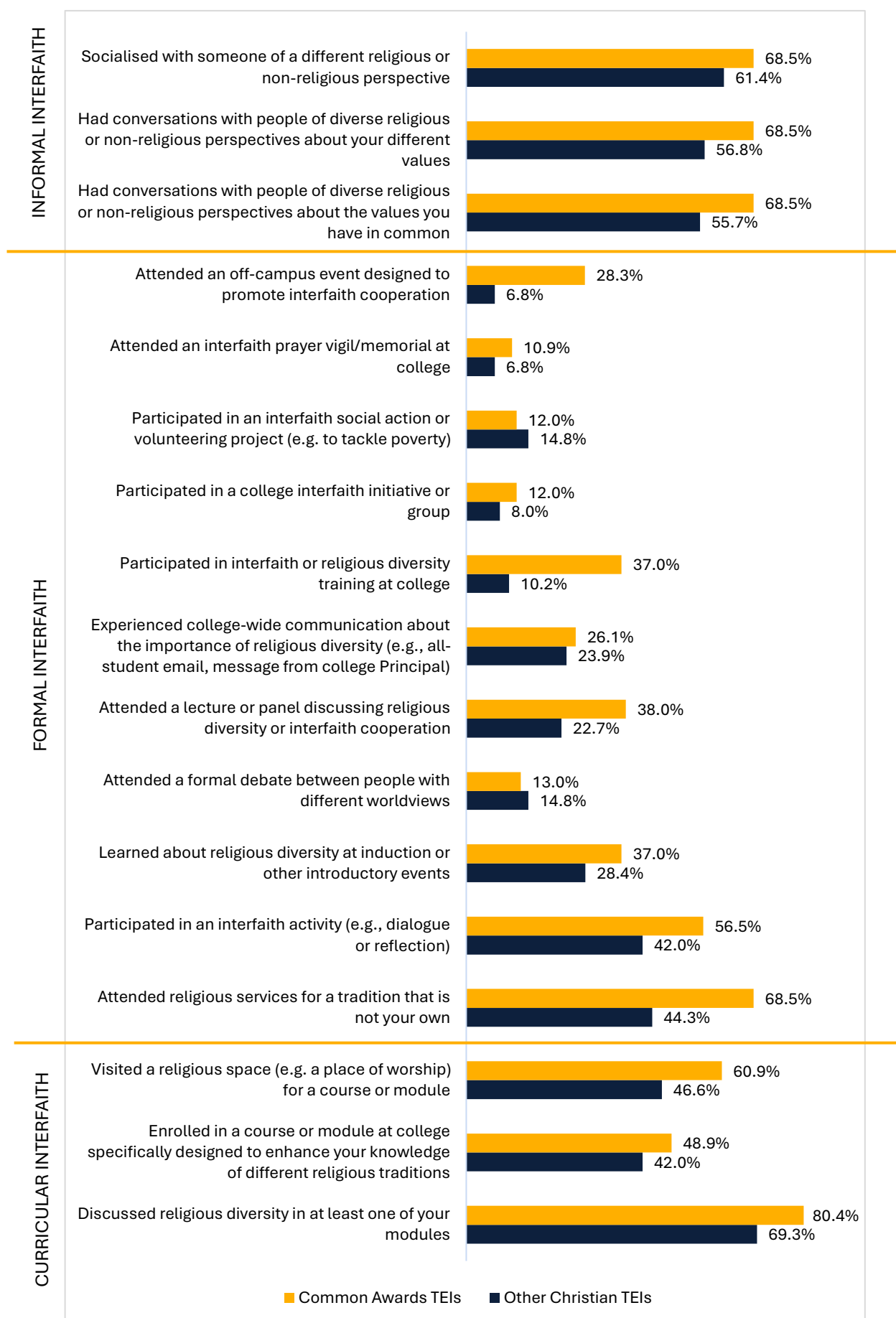
- Enrolled in a course or module specifically designed to enhance their knowledge of different religious traditions
- Visited a religious space (e.g. a place of worship) for a course or module

As well as the following four formal activities:

- Attended religious services for a tradition that is not your own
- Participated in an interfaith activity (e.g., dialogue or reflection)
- Attended a lecture or panel discussing religious diversity or interfaith cooperation
- Participated in interfaith or religious diversity training in their TEI

Vocation was not influential on students' engagement in *informal* interfaith, however. In other words, training for ordination did not have an effect on the likelihood of students reporting socialising or having casual conversations across faith difference.

Graph 2: Percentage of students reporting engagement in informal, formal and curricular interfaith activities since joining their TEI, comparing students at Common Awards TEIs with those studying at other Christian TEIs (N= 202)



TEIs are ‘safe’ spaces, but not equally supportive for all students

Previous research has demonstrated that students in higher education need to be able to express their identity and worldviews safely, as well as have opportunities to be challenged and have their views critiqued.²³ The Coventry report sought to explore whether this balance of ‘safe spaces’ and ‘provocative encounters’ was found in the surveyed colleges, as this balance is important for what the report referred to as the ‘interfaith climate’ in educational settings.

The second survey asked students to what extent they felt ‘safe’ to express their personal worldviews, and to what extent they felt their personal worldviews were respected at college. Looking specifically now at students in Common Awards TEIs, most agreed or strongly agreed with the following sentiments indicating experiences of ‘safe spaces’ in their TEIs (see Table 2)

Table 2: The proportion of Common Awards TEIs ‘agreeing’ or ‘strongly agreeing’ that...

They feel that their personal worldviews are respected	90.3%
There is a place at their college where they can express their personal worldview	88.0%
Their classes are safe places for them to express their worldview	84.8%
Their college in general is a safe place for them to express their worldview	80.5%
Faculty and staff at their college accommodates their needs with regard to celebrating holidays and other important observances to their religious and non-religious worldview	79.2%

These high scores may reflect deliberate inclusion policies, visible chaplaincy and pastoral care, and/or interfaith engagement. These responses differ only marginally to those from students studying at other Christian TEIs; in all but one case students studying at Common Awards TEIs are only slightly more likely to agree with the statements to those that study elsewhere.

I isolated the 92 students who study at Common Awards TEIs and tested whether institution- and personal-related demographics influenced perceptions of safety. Only one factor was statistically significant: sexual orientation. LGBTQI+ students²⁴ were significantly less likely than heterosexual students to agree that:

- Their college is a safe space for them to express their worldview (55.6% compared to 86.3%);
- There is a place at their college where they can express their personal worldview (72.2% compared to 91.85%);

²³ Eboo Patel and Benjamin P. Correia-Harker, ‘Bonding and bridging: An equilibrium that matters for engaging religious diversity in a pluralistic society’, *Journal of College and Character*, 21.1 (2020), pp. 42-48.

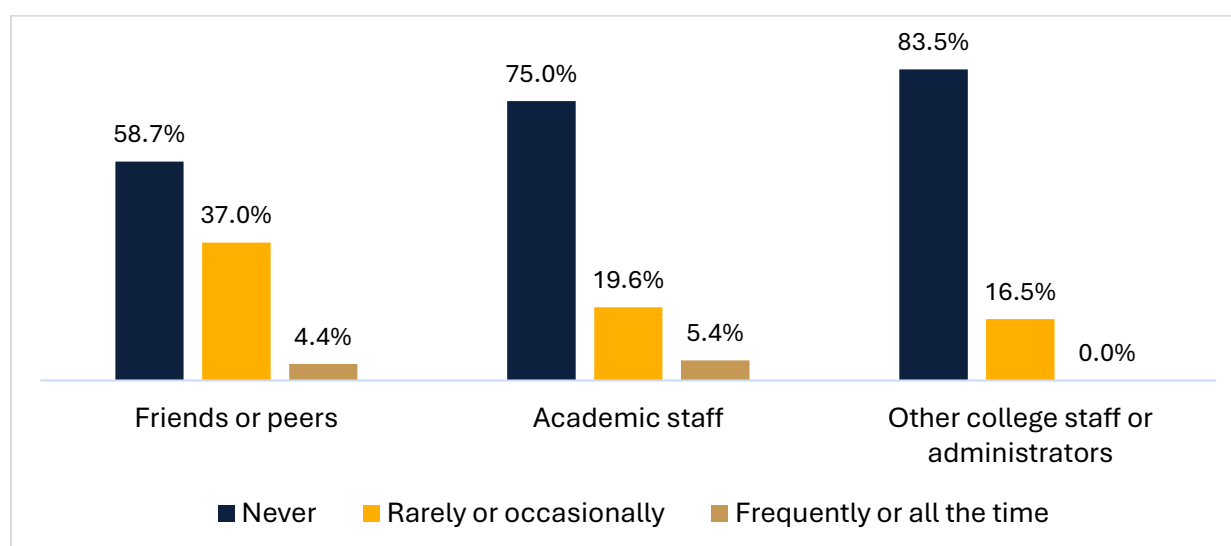
²⁴ We must recognise that the number of LGBTQI+ students responding to these statements is low – between 17 and 20, depending on the statement. However, the criteria for conducting chi square tests of association were met, and the reported values are all $p < 0.05$, leading us to be 95% confident that these results did not happen by chance. I suggest future research explore these initial findings in greater detail and to better understand the reach and impact of this potential concern.

- Their classes are safe spaces for them to express their worldview (66.7% compared to 89%); and
- They feel that their personal worldviews are respected (73.3% compared to 92.4%).

In short, a generally supportive climate is not equally felt: LGBTQI+ students report significantly lower safety and respect. These results shift the question from ‘is our environment safe?’ to ‘safe for whom?’, with LGBTQI+ students signalling the gap.

Slightly higher numbers of students reported experiencing insensitivity at their college, though patterns differ by the direction the insensitivity is perceived to come from. Friends/peers are the most common source of reported insensitivity, with 37% of students experiencing insensitivity from them rarely/occasionally and 4.4% frequently. Academic staff fare relatively well overall (75% of students never experiencing insensitivity from them), although that almost 2 in ten students report insensitivity from them, if only rarely, is concerning. Other college staff/administrators are least likely to be a source of insensitivity (see Graph 3).

Graph 3: Percentage of Common Awards students reporting experiencing sensitivity from friends/peers, academic staff and other college staff/administrators (N= 92)



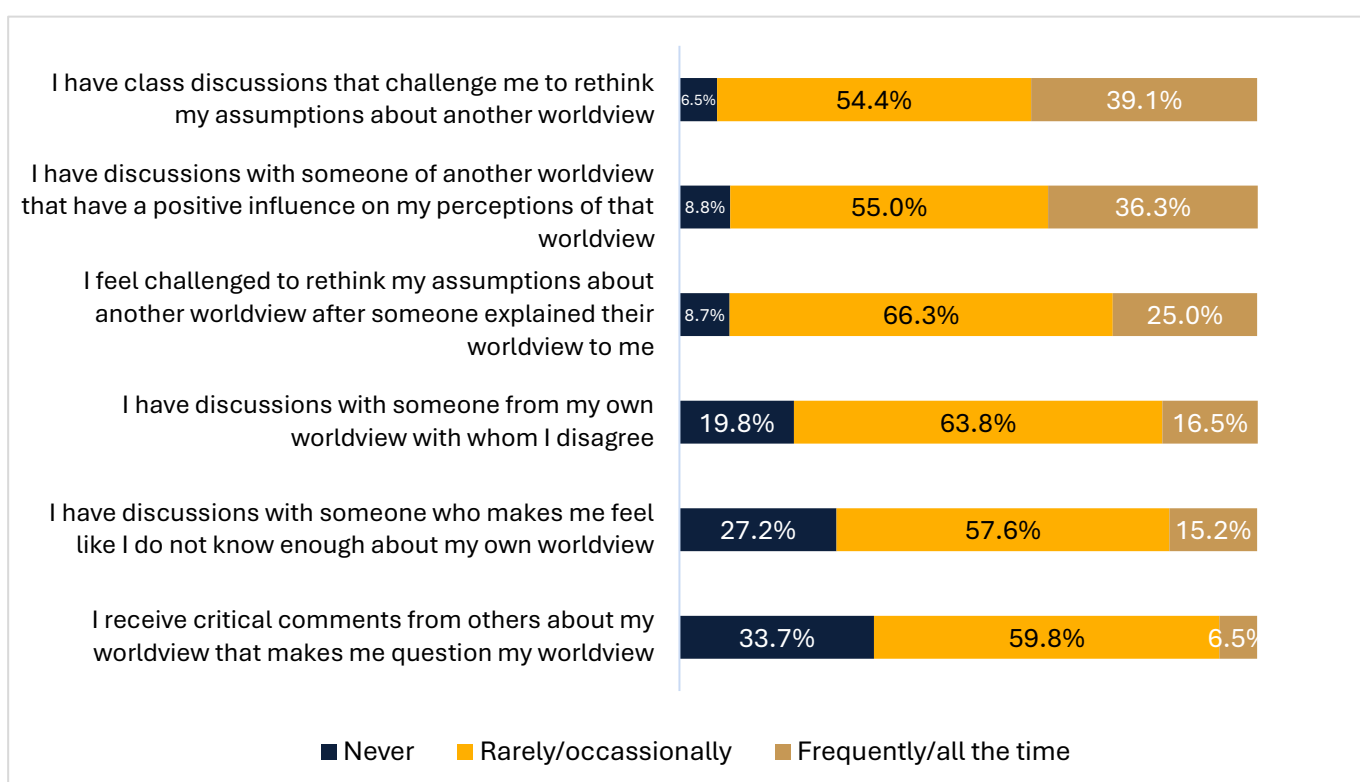
Taking the most frequently reported form of insensitivity – that from friends and peers – these experiences were most frequent for full-time students, with 48.6% experiencing it rarely/occasionally and 8.6% all the time (compared to 30.9% and 1.8% for part-time students). None of the other demographic variables had a statistically significant influence on reported experiences of insensitivity.

To summarise, Common Awards colleges appear broadly supportive, but this safety is not experienced evenly. LGBTQI+ students are consistently less likely than heterosexual peers to feel safe and respected, and the most common friction comes from friends and peers, felt more often by full-time students.

There are ‘provocative encounters’ in TEIs, but some students feel coerced

The second survey asked how often, if at all, students report constructive engagements with different worldviews that challenge and stretch their preconceptions and assumptions, conceptualised in the Coventry project as ‘provocative encounters’.²⁵ I found that these encounters happen relatively frequently among Common Awards students (see Graph 4).

Graph 4: Percentage of Common Awards students reporting experiencing provocative encounters during college (N= 92)



The strongest drivers are structured learning: 39.1% say class discussions challenge their assumptions about other worldviews ‘frequently/all the time’, and 36.3% frequently have cross-worldview conversations that positively shape their perceptions. A further 25% are often prompted to rethink after someone explains their worldview. Engaging across disagreement also happens — 63.8% occasionally have discussion with someone from their own worldview with whom they disagree (16.5% frequently). More potentially adversarial moments are rarer: only 6.5% frequently receive critical comments that make them question their worldview (though 59.8% experience this occasionally), and 15.2% frequently feel they don’t know enough about their own worldview.

²⁵ In previous research, ‘provocative encounters’, as operationalised in the surveys, have proven significantly influential on growth in pluralism orientation and appreciative attitudes (concepts explored below). See for example Kristin Aune and others, ‘How can universities support students’ interfaith learning? Findings from a longitudinal survey of students in the UK’, *Higher Education* (2025), < <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-025-01533-w> > [accessed 22 July 2026].

Overall, most students encounter these experiences at least occasionally, with classrooms and dialogue serving as the main catalysts.

Ethnicity was statistically significant in the analyses, with white students more likely than non-white students to report engaging, at least occasionally, in five of the six provocative encounters:

- Had class discussions that challenged you to rethink your assumptions about another worldview (96.1% non-white students vs. 80.0% white students)
- Felt challenged to rethink your assumptions about another worldview after someone explained their worldview to you (94.7% vs. 73.3%)
- Had a discussion with someone of another worldview that had a positive influence on your perceptions of that worldview (94.7% vs. 73.3%); and
- Had a discussion with someone from your own worldview with whom you disagreed (85.3% vs. 53.3%).

Non-white students are also more likely to report ‘never’ on these items (e.g., 20.0% vs. 3.9% for class discussions). We must remember that the sample size of non-white students is small, however that these results are statistically significant suggests that access to – or comfort within – worldview-stretching conversations is nevertheless uneven.

Gender was also statistically significant in relation to one statement: ‘Had a discussion with someone who made you feel like you did not know enough about your own worldview’. Whilst 42.1% of male students reported never experiencing this form of provocative encounter, this dropped to just 16% of female students. Put another way, over 8 in 10 female students (84%) experienced this at least occasionally, compared to just over half (57.9%) of male students. Overall, the benefits of provocative encounters appear uneven – more accessible to white students, and more likely to leave female students feeling under-prepared.

During the provocative encounter process, students are placed in a position of vulnerability. I found that among Common Awards students, around 4 in 10 report experiencing what we call religion and worldview-related ‘coercion’ in their TEIs, measured through four statements (see Table 3).

Table 3: The proportion of Common Awards Colleges reporting that they at least occasionally...

Feel pressured by others in college to change their worldview	37.0%
Feel pressured to listen to others’ perspectives when you don’t want to hear about them	33.7%
Feel pressured to keep their worldview to themselves	42.3%
Feel pressure to separate their academic experience from their personal worldview	34.7%

The above proportions of Common Awards students reporting at least occasionally experiencing worldview-related coercion on campus are slightly higher than those of students studying at other Christian TEIs, indicating that pressures may be more keenly felt at Common Awards institutions. I also found a statistically significant association with mode of study: Common Awards students who study full-time are more likely than part-time students to feel pressure to *separate* their academic

experience from their personal worldview (28.6% experiencing this rarely/occasionally and 11.4% frequently or all the time, compared to 32.7% and 0%, respectively, for part-time students).

To summarise, the picture is one of provocative engagement across worldview difference – yet unevenly distributed, with white students reporting more frequent provocative encounters than non-white peers. Alongside this, around four in ten students report worldview-related pressures; these pressures are reported slightly more often at Common Awards institutions than at other Christian TEIs.

TEIs encourage positive engagement with pluralism

The two surveys captured different forms of interfaith learning, drawn from established academic concepts of ‘pluralism orientation’ and ‘appreciative attitudes’,²⁶ which act as benchmarks for students’ ability to relate well across difference both during and beyond their time at college.

‘Pluralism orientation’ is the extent to which students positively engage with religious and worldview diversity, assessed through 22 Likert scale statements/five scales measuring students’:

- Sense of themselves as global citizens,
- Goodwill towards people of other worldviews,
- Appreciation of interreligious commonalities and differences,
- Commitment to interfaith leadership and service, and
- Openness to forming interfaith relationships.

I measured the extent to which students agreed with the 22 Likert scale statements (from 1 = ‘strongly disagree’ to 5 = ‘strongly agree’) and calculated a total ‘pluralism score’ ranging from 5–110, and then split these scores into ‘low’ ‘medium’ and ‘high’ categories. Of the 170 Common Awards students who responded to the pluralism statements, 96.5% were high scorers. The remaining 3.5% were medium scorers. This represents a slight increase on the scores of those studying elsewhere; 88.9% of students from other Christian TEIs were high scorers.

Using the second survey sample (92 Common Awards students), I conducted bivariate Spearman’s correlation to test the relationship between interfaith activity and students’ pluralism scores. I found that both formal and informal interfaith activity is statistically significant; as engagement in these activities increases, so too does their pluralism score.²⁷ A sense of safety and belonging in a TEI that welcomes diverse worldviews is also important. When students perceive their college as a safe and welcoming space for religious diversity, their levels of pluralism also rise.

²⁶ Kristin Aune, and others, *Interfaith Learning in Christian and Muslim Higher Education Colleges* (Coventry University, 2025). The Coventry project focused on two aspects of Mayhew and Rockenbach’s (2021) ‘Interfaith Learning and Development’ model: ‘pluralism orientation’ and ‘appreciative attitudes’. See Matthew J. Mayhew and Alyssa N. Rockenbach, ‘Interfaith Learning and Development’, *Journal of College and Character*, 22.1 (2021), pp.1–12.

²⁷ With this finding and all subsequent correlation results, we *cannot infer causation*. Rather, positive correlations indicate that the student experiences and attitudes mutually support one another; encouraging all of these together is vital for interfaith learning.

The second survey asked the 92 Common Awards students whether their view on any of the pluralism statements has changed since starting college. Just over a third of students (34 students, 37%) affirmed that their views had changed. When prompted to reflect in their own words on how their attitude had changed and what aspect(s) of the college environment or their studies had contributed to that change, 29 provided a response. Thematic analysis of their reflections reveal a complex and varied journey of engagement with pluralism, organised here into seven themes.

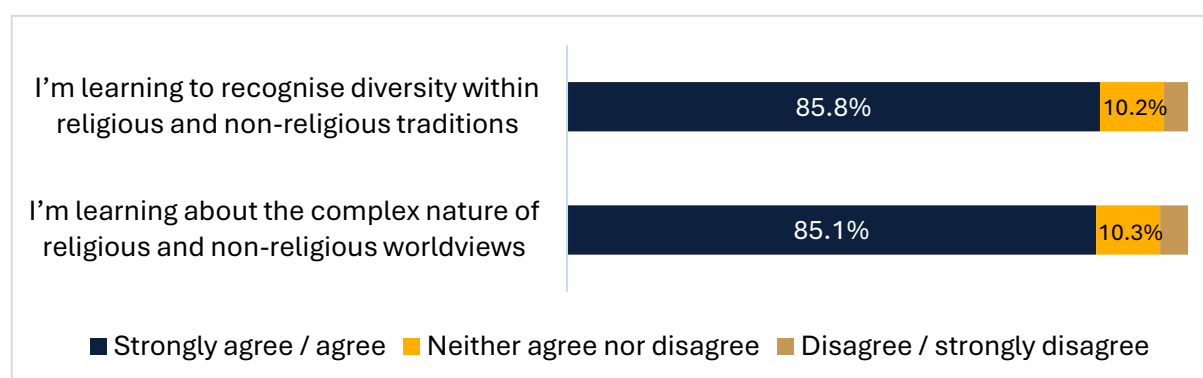
1. Growing respect, understanding, and openness to other religions and worldviews (10 references): The largest group of comments emphasised how **students became more open, compassionate, and respectful towards other faiths while continuing to value their Christian identity**. One student explained that they had developed ‘a deeper understanding of pluralism from a Christian perspective, that has allowed me to feel far more comfortable with my Christian perspective and absolutely respectful of all the other insights and pathways that God has revealed to others.’ Another highlighted the impact of the college environment: ‘I am more accepting of other ideas. The college environment offers open and honest debate.’ For others, the shift was about overcoming fear: ‘I have a much more positive approach to other faiths than I did before starting college. It has removed the fear of the unknown.’ Collectively, these voices suggest that engagement with pluralism often deepened, rather than undermined, students’ faith.
2. Impact of curriculum (8 references): Despite curricular engagement not being statistically significantly correlated with pluralism in the quantitative data, **structured teaching, including modules and interfaith courses, played a role in shaping attitudes**. One student noted: ‘Following the interfaith module I feel I have a greater understanding of other faiths and have seen examples of different faiths talking and working together that I would like to emulate in my ministry.’ Another commented on the practical influence of a specific course: ‘A module on Islam encouraged me to enter into dialogue with a Muslim friend about his faith.’ A student from Sri Lanka spoke of personal transformation: ‘My past experience and my view of other religious people as “fundamentalists” has changed... ever since I started my training at [redacted] and very specially after taking the “Inter-faith Easter School course”.’ These examples show how curricular interfaith can open space for growth, even when unsettling.
3. Personal encounters and relationships (4 references): **Direct engagement with people of other faiths provided some of the most powerful learning moments**. One student wrote: ‘Having the opportunity to spend time with people from other faiths has enabled me to question what comes next for those who are non-believers of my own faith.’ Interfaith socialisations were also transformative: ‘I live with some Muslim women, and socialising in the kitchen has taught me a lot about Islam.’ Others spoke of life-changing experiences abroad: ‘I have been fortunate enough to attend two scholarships: one at [redacted] in Jerusalem and the other at [redacted – English cathedral]. In both instances, I met people from all over the world and learned about their particular contexts and cultures. I made life-long friends and continue to grow and develop my views and understandings based on these new relationships.’

4. Cooperation and respectful disagreement (3 references): Reflections highlighted how **discomfort can be productive**. One student admitted unease, but growth, studying with others who do not necessarily share their worldview: 'In studying with students who don't share my worldview, at first I was somehow disturbed, but with progress, I started to understand their views and the reasons for their beliefs by sharing experiences from different cultures and backgrounds. I could easily judge their attitude as negative but for now, I have understood their attitude, and we end up by building a closer relationship.' Another wrote that their time at their TEI has 'reinforced and emphasised how important it is that we have mutual respect and work together.'
5. **Social justice and liberative theologies** (1 reference): A single, particularly rich, statement linked pluralism with wider justice issues: 'I did not really think about things like racism, environmental issues, and justice before, but now I am aware of them. I feel passionate about working towards justice and caring for the environment. My worldview was changed through what might be considered as "alternative" theologies, such as liberation theology, Black theology, disability theology, trauma theology, feminist theology, and queer theology.' This reflects how pluralism can broaden theological imagination as well as interfaith awareness.
6. Challenges, reservations, and resistance (4 references): A minority voiced concerns, highlighting how **interfaith learning can provoke defensiveness as well as openness**. One student warned: 'I see the importance in the dialogue. Instead of seeing each other as religions, it can help form useful and caring relationships... Nevertheless, I will not participate in any dialogue that seeks to please others and dilute my beliefs. What I have noticed is, the teaching is one-sided. Christians accommodating others, which is true, but we do so by making our stance on scriptures seem invalid.' Another confessed: 'I've become less confident in my own faith which has led me to be less open to other faiths while I navigate my own path. The course I'm on feels to have been designed to shake your foundational beliefs in the hope it will root you stronger if you're still standing by the end.' A third said bluntly: 'To be honest, the more I read about Muslims' view of Christ... the more I thought, I don't want to hear any more. As a Pentecostal Christian, who believes in Christ's divinity, I think it is not right!'
7. The final thematic area of students' reflections was critical reflection and reassessment of beliefs (7 references): For some, **exposure to pluralism prompted deeper questioning of their own traditions**. One student noted: 'I am studying in a college that is only training people for Anglican Christian ministry, so there is no interfaith diversity, but my views have been changed by talking to and collaborating with people from different traditions and who hold different Scriptural interpretations within the Anglican church.' Another emphasised denominational complexity: 'Most issues are not about people from other faiths or religions but from within the faith itself.'

These final reflections echo the survey questions designed to capture students' *intra-faith* learning measured through students' recognition that, within college, they are learning both a) about the complex nature of different worldviews and b) to appreciate the diversity that exists within religious and non-religious traditions themselves.

Of the 176 Common Awards students who addressed this in the survey, the majority 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they are learning these sentiments (see Graph 5).

Graph 5: Percentage of Common Awards students who agree with the survey's 'intra-faith learning' statements (N= 176)



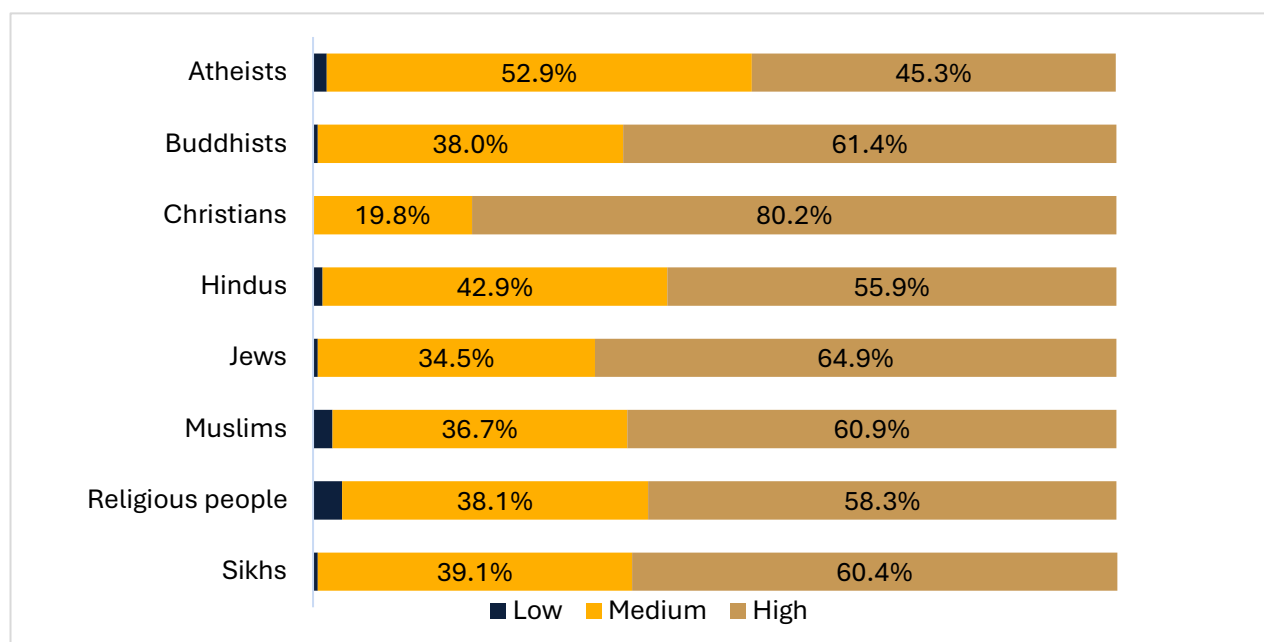
Over 85% agree that their studies are helping them both to understand the complex nature of religious and non-religious worldviews, and to recognise the diversity that exists within these traditions. Only a small minority (around 4–5%) disagree, while about one in ten remain neutral. This indicates that, for most students, Christian colleges are contexts where they are encouraged to appreciate the *internal diversity* of belief and practice. Neutral responses may point to students who are still in the process of making sense of these complexities or who have not yet experienced diversity strongly in their own learning.

Students appreciate religious others, though geopolitics and ethics also impact attitudes

The second measure of interfaith learning considered in the survey was 'appreciative attitudes', a multi-construct item measuring the extent to which students reporting, in general, that people in each respective worldview group (atheists, Buddhist, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs and 'religious people' in general) a) make positive contributions to society, b) are ethical people, c) are people to whom the student feels a sense of good will, and d) are people with whom the student reports that they have things in common.

As with pluralism, I calculated each student's 'low', 'medium' or 'high' score towards each group, presented in Graph 6.

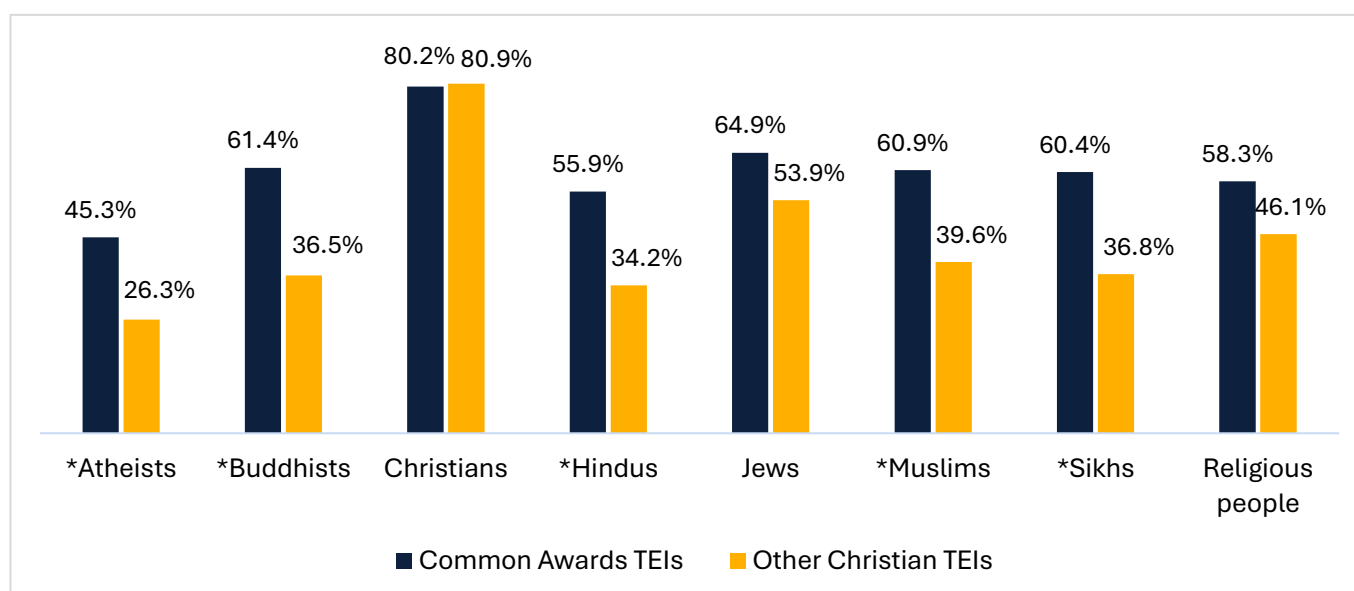
Graph 6: Percentage of Common Awards students scoring 'low', 'medium' and 'high' levels of appreciation towards different groups (N= 176)



The majority of appreciation scores fall in the 'High' category, with especially strong results for Christians (80.2%) and Jews (64.9%), followed closely by Muslims, Buddhists, and Sikhs (all around 60%). Hindus also lean high (55.9%), though with a larger medium share. In contrast, Atheists have the lowest proportion of high scorers (45.3%) and the highest in the medium category (52.9%).

Notably, students studying at Common Awards TEIs are more likely to have high levels of appreciation towards almost all groups explored in the research than students at other Christian TEIs. (see Graph 7).

Graph 7: Percentage of students scoring 'high' levels of appreciation towards different groups, comparing those at Common Awards TEIs with those at other Christian TEIs (N= 374, * denotes a statistically significant comparison)



Isolating the 176 Common Awards students who answered this question, their mode of study was influential on their responses. Students studying part-time were more likely than those studying full-time to have high appreciation scores towards Hindus (61.8% vs 45.5%), Muslims (66.3% vs 51.5%) and Sikhs (67.0% vs 49.3%).

Using the second survey sample (92 Common Awards students), I conducted Spearman's correlation to test the relationship between interfaith activity and students' appreciation scores. I found that informal interfaith activity is statistically significantly positively associated with appreciation towards atheists, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and 'religious people' in general. In other words, as the frequency of informal interfaith engagement increases, so too does their appreciation. Feeling that your TEI welcomes diverse worldviews is also important; when students perceive their college as a welcoming space for religious diversity, their appreciation towards all non-Christian groups explored in the research grows.

The second survey (92 Common Awards students) asked students whether their attitude towards any of the specified groups had changed since starting college. 17 said it had—half the number of those who said the same about their pluralism attitudes. Thematic analysis of the 17 students' reflections on how their attitudes toward other religious groups have shifted since starting at Christian colleges reveal four key themes.

1. Ethical reflection and theological framing (3 references): Three students **weighed traditions according to shared or clashing moral commitments**. One noted, 'Recognising there is a strong ethical presence in all, but all use different ethical frameworks... Homophobia and Transphobia are troublesome in many religions, making conversations impossible.' Others used doctrinal concepts such as natural law or original sin to interpret their responses: 'I am deeply convinced by the Christian doctrine of original sin... All the groups listed are loveable, forgivable, made in God's image ... but that is not the same as ethical.' And 'I think my view of natural law has grown'. These frameworks offered a lens through which students judged both common ground and differences.
2. Learning and transformative encounters (6 references): Some students described becoming **more open through structured teaching and encounters with diversity**. As one student put it, 'I have a greater understanding of other worldviews... through encountering more people... and from direct teaching.' Another noted, 'Our spirituality module... was challenging of established stereotypes'. For some, curricula had a lasting impact: 'I did a course that focused on Islam and had some interactions with some Muslim women. It was an amazing experience. I will never forget it.' One student talked of how their college experiences reshaped their attitudes whilst still affirming their Christian conviction: 'I was somehow exclusive to other views than mine, but due to what I have seen at the college, and interaction with my Tutors with deep discussions at different times, this shaped me... from exclusiveness to inclusiveness, while the foundation of my faith in Christ remains unchanged'.

3. **Persistence or intensification of bias** (1 additional reference): However, encounters with diversity do not always result in more open or positive attitudes. One student's reflection expressed a hardening attitude for Islam. Although they specify that their attitude is 'not due to the college or course itself, they go on to say, 'I've always had a fear and dislike for Islam, this has only been strengthened during my time at school... Atheists and Jews continue to drive the world forward much more than any other people.'
4. **Geopolitical context** (3 references): Factors outside TELs also impact students' attitudes simultaneous to their studies, sometimes negatively. Three students reflect on **global conflicts, including Israel-Palestine and the Ukraine war, which generated complex and sometimes troubling reactions**. For some, these events cultivated empathy toward Palestinian Muslims and Arab Christians, with one remarking, 'I gained a very different perspective on the Muslim people living in Palestine and the hardships they endure – also the Arabic Christian community...' However, the same student continued, 'My views on those of the Jewish faith, unfortunately, have changed negatively.' Another student admitted that their views of Judaism grew more negative after witnessing the conflict firsthand: 'After visiting Palestine/Israel, I was shocked and appalled... this has made my view of Judaism more negative.' These comments show how direct exposure to contested geopolitical realities can powerfully shape perceptions of religious groups more widely.

In some cases, college experience did not overcome prejudice. Overall, however, the analysis shows how education, encounters, and broader geopolitical context can both challenge and reorient Common Awards students' appreciative attitudes towards others.

Key takeaways

Looking to the future, over two thirds (69.4%) of Common Awards students ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ with the sentiment ‘Based on my experience of college, I am more open to learning about other religions and worldviews’. By contrast, only 7.3%, fewer than 1 in 10 disagreed.

This analysis has revealed several key takeaways. These can be summarised as:

Distinctive student profile

- Common Awards students are more likely to be training for faith leadership, older, women, and studying part-time compared to other Christian TEI students.

High interfaith expectations and engagement

- Common Awards students have high expectations for inclusive environments compared to students at other TEIs.
- Common Awards colleges also see greater participation in interfaith activities (formal, informal, and curricular).

Campus climate and ‘safe spaces’

- Most students feel safe to express their worldviews.
- However, LGBTQI+ students consistently report lower levels of safety and respect.
- Peer interactions are the most common source of insensitivity.

Learning through ‘provocative encounters’

- Provocative encounters often challenge assumptions and broaden perspectives.
- They mostly happen through classroom-based discussions.
- White students report more frequent worldview-stretching encounters than non-white students, and female students more than male students.

Pluralism and appreciative attitudes

- 96.5% of Common Awards students score ‘high’ on pluralism measures, above other TEIs.
- Pluralism increases with interfaith engagement and when students perceive their college as safe and welcoming.
- Students show highest appreciation for Christians and Jews, and lowest for atheists (more ambivalence).

Shifts in attitudes

- Many students report becoming more open, compassionate, and respectful toward other faiths while affirming their Christian convictions.
- Statistics show the importance of informal interfaith and a welcoming college climate in shaping interfaith growth.
- Curriculum and personal encounters are major drivers of positive change.
- Geopolitical exposure (e.g., Israel/Palestine) can shape attitudes, sometimes negatively.

Overall conclusion

- Common Awards colleges provide strong opportunities for interfaith learning.

III. Contextual Reflections

Elizabeth Phillips

Common Awards TEIs

After the completion of the new data analysis by Lucy Peacock, I convened an online Roundtable Discussion event in which the original Coventry project was summarised by Kristin Aune, the new data analysis was presented by Lucy Peacock, and I facilitated a structured conversation about its implications for Common Awards TEIs generally, and participants' teaching contexts specifically. The event was attended by 15 instructors from 10 different TEIs.²⁸ Our conversation was structured by the following three questions.²⁹

What strikes you as most significant in this research for theological education in Common Awards TEIs?

Multiple participants focused on the importance of considering how to provide encounter opportunities for online students, and viewed this as a significant challenge. One participant noted the importance of encountering 'other faiths in action' rather than just talking about them.

There were also multiple reflections on the importance of informal, relational encounters with people of other faiths. Participants discussed whether it was better to provide and structure these opportunities, or to signpost their availability elsewhere. Some suggested relational encounters may best be included within ministerial formation through placements in multifaith chaplaincies. This led multiple participants to reflect on the need to be more intentional about prioritising placements that include interfaith opportunities.

Participants were very interested in the findings related to 'provocative encounters'. One participant argued that the differences in the experiences of such encounters between students of different ethnicities point towards the need for greater diversity in TEI teaching staff, as students experience encounters differently when they see their identities represented in the staff. Another participant noted that diversity of culture and class in TEIs is important in addition to ethnicity.

One participant reflected that the findings on how willingness to engage in provocative encounters correlates with transformation – that students who were more willing to engage experienced more transformation. This resonated with their own experience of students who participated in the sustained encounter of the Oxford Muslim-Christian Summer School, and how transformative the

²⁸ 'TEI' here refers to individual training institutions, although some are federated into joint TEIs for the purposes of the Common Awards. While not a representative sample, the participant group was diverse in terms of gender (5 men and 10 women), multiple ethnicities, and both conservative and progressive theological traditions.

²⁹ For further details of the event see Appendix A.

experience is. In continued discussion of provocative encounters, Lucy Peacock also noted that when religious literacy is low, encounter can reinforce prejudice rather than build understanding.

Multiple participants were also interested in the high pluralism numbers,³⁰ and what could explain the fact that students seem to arrive at TEIs with high numbers and leave with high numbers but also report a high level of transformation. Students in TEIs had exceptionally high pluralism numbers in contrast with the researchers' previous work in universities; Lucy Peacock noted 97% in Common Awards TEIs as contrasted with about 40% in their research with university students. Kristin Aune noted that although this pluralism score was high, the numbers measuring appreciation of other faiths show 'kind of a step further', beyond pluralistic tolerance. She shared that researchers have noted the importance of interfaith placements and visits as a key factor in the higher numbers in theological education as opposed to universities, in addition to the difference that TEIs are 'building moral communities' which are more holistic than most students' experience of university.³¹

Is interfaith encounter understood as part of diversity and inclusion in your institution? Do you think it should be? Why or why not?

All participants said that their TEIs did not understand interfaith encounter as part of diversity and inclusion efforts. There was no consensus on whether it should be.

Some participants were surprised and curious to observe that in TEIs interfaith opportunities have not been understood in relation to formation of aware and inclusive Christian ministers. One participant noted that ministerial formation should definitely include 'making sure they are well informed about different forms of diversity and inclusion', yet noted, 'I've never heard or seen interfaith issues being described in that way, so that's really intriguing.'

Some participants made observations about why religious diversity is not part of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) conversations in TEIs. One participant said EDI is about being inclusive of diversity in the student body (and ideally staff), and because all the students are Christian, religious diversity is not included. Another participant suggested that TEIs may just mirror society in this regard, as corporate and government EDI initiatives also often ignore religious diversity.

I do lots of work for secular organisations on religious diversity and equality, and always I'm the first person they've ever had to speak about religious diversity as a protected characteristic. So they've done ethnicity, they've done gender, they've done sexuality, they may have done disability. They may have done stuff around parental leave and maternity leave, but they've never thought seriously about religious diversity other than putting a prayer room in somewhere and ignoring it.

However, another participant felt that a categorical distinction between EDI and interfaith encounter is important, because EDI is about equity and representation within the institution based

³⁰ See pp. 17ff., above.

³¹ Davignon, Phil, and Robert A. Thomson Jr., 'Christian Colleges and Universities as Moral Communities: The Effects of Institutional Characteristics on Student Religiosity', *Review of Religious Research*, 57.4 (2015), pp. 531-554.

on 'immutable characteristics', whereas interfaith is about other people's beliefs (presumably chosen rather than 'immutable'). 'Diversity requires its own set of competencies, its own set of activity within the church itself, whereas interfaith dialogue would be more of a cultural competency' for how to 'engage with the world'. This participant was particularly concerned that confusing the two 'would reduce the work that needs to go into diversity'.

What implications does this research have for your own work and your institution?

Several participants were struck by the high expectations students reported for interfaith opportunities in their training. One reflected on this in relation to their practice of admissions interviews:

Like others, I was astonished by the finding that the majority of Common Awards students have high expectations for interfaith encounter while in training. . . That's not my experience in eleven years of interviews. No one has asked me about interfaith encounters. That was probably a few hundred students, applicants. So it's making me wonder, am I, are we missing something that is present in many of the students that come to us? And we're not meeting those expectations?

Several participants also reflected on the importance of relational encounters, and how such opportunities could be integrated into their TELs. One said, 'I think it's made me think about how we can deliberately foster those informal learning settings, those conversations and friendships.' Another wondered how they could 'develop other things that might not be part of the curriculum . . . how to more intentionally develop opportunities for encounter.'

One participant wondered about the impact of whether or not tutors in TELs are modelling engagement with other faiths. Kristin Aune reflected that it is very impactful because of the 'moral community' aspect of the TEL. She also noted that in their research they heard some 'really positive things from students about, my lecturer took me to a synagogue, and, you know, it really opened my eyes when I saw their hospitality, for example.'

One instructor who takes students on interfaith visits noted that different things sit well with or put off different students. 'Sometimes we get to the end and people are a bit more negative about other faiths than they were at the start, or about some aspects of it. And it's just interesting where that tracks with where they are theologically.' For example, in the experience of an interfaith encounter, conservative students may be put off by perceived polytheism while liberal students may be put off by perceived gender inequalities.

An instructor from a TEL in a diverse urban setting reflected on the disconnect between their theory and their practice of 'contextual theology'. They noted that while they were 'preaching the virtues of contextual theology' yet 'not really being engaged in our own context, which is . . . such a rich interfaith area'.

Cambridge Theological Federation Case Study

During this project I also convened a discussion group of CTF students and instructors on the Common Awards. Although it was a small group (four instructors, including myself, and four students) there were representatives from all three institutions using the Common Awards, and from a variety of awards and specialisms.

The participants were given the Coventry report and Lucy Peacock's data analysis for this project in advance. We began by discussing the key points from these studies, then moved on to discuss the implications for the CTF. First we listed all of the opportunities for interfaith encounter that participants were aware of in the CTF.³² Shared opportunities included:

Offerings from the Woolf Institute:

- One 10-credit Common Awards module offered at levels 4 and 5,
- One 2-day short course alternating Januarys for those unable to use the module,
- Annual Holocaust Memorial Day commemoration event,
- And open availability of the Institute's library and public events.

Other opportunities:

- One institution has sent students to the Oxford Muslim-Christian Summer School.
- Some students do placements with multifaith chaplaincies, multifaith organisations, or in churches in religiously diverse contexts.
- One institution has invited the St Philip's Centre to lead a day on interfaith.
- There has been some interaction between some institutions and the Cambridge Muslim College (though ad hoc and limited).
- Some institutions have partnerships in international locations where students experience multifaith contexts during short visits or placements (e.g. India and Israel-Palestine).
- Some students may have incidental encounters with guests of other faiths visiting their institution (though unintentional and limited).

While there are several possible opportunities for Common Awards students in the CTF, it is also possible for them to miss out entirely on interfaith opportunities during their training. Staff and students identified several barriers to better provision:

- Some Common Awards students want to do research related to interfaith, and it is a challenge to find supervisors for this work.
- Participants from one institution identified a lack of interest in and curiosity about other faiths in their colleagues. It was noted in conversation that people who are not from places

³² The purpose of this conversation was not to determine a definitive list of all opportunities available across the CTF, rather a snapshot of the experiences of Common Awards students and instructors in the CTF. A separate study would be needed to ascertain all the available opportunities, including for students on Cambridge University and Anglia Ruskin University awards, as well as in the research institutions of the CTF; the utility of such a study is questionable as offerings change frequently enough to make publishing such findings of limited use.

where there is religious diversity may not have the same baseline of experience and knowledge to open up their curiosity and questions about other faiths.

- One participant suggested that some students do not realise that their specifically Christian language is not sufficient for effective presence in a multifaith context.
- While some participants saw the possibility of overseas placements with interfaith dimensions as positive offerings, others believed it is a problem to send students overseas instead of encountering religious and other forms of diversity here in England.
- Although there are many opportunities available in Cambridge given the presence of the Woolf Institute and the Cambridge Interfaith Programme, few CTF students take part in anything that is not required.

Next, we asked the student participants to share their reflections on the research and on their experiences of interfaith opportunities in the CTF.³³

In relation to the research on ‘provocative encounters’, one student shared that their experience was that where instructors are doing explicit work on antiracism and anticolonialism in their teaching, there is a backlash from some students which is borne by other students who ‘represent kind of, in other people’s minds, other identities’. The student felt this was a ‘social penalty’ for students of minority identities in the context, and that staff did not seem to recognise this dynamic or support students in navigating it.

Students expressed appreciation for aspects of interfaith opportunities in the CTF, noting especially opportunities for meeting and speaking with people of other faiths provided within the teaching led by the Woolf Institute. They also appreciated the historical input provided by Dr Esther-Miriam Wagner, the Institute’s Executive Director, who teaches about the Cairo Genizah as a way into reframing questions of pluralism, religiously diverse societies, and how people of different beliefs have lived and worked together for centuries. They appreciated seeing that questions of different theological beliefs were not the only way to enter into interfaith relations.

Suggestions for improvement to Woolf offerings included adding a day to the January short course to focus on social and political dimensions of interfaith, even more opportunities to meet a more diverse range of people of other faiths, and given that the short course or the Holocaust Memorial Day commemoration may be some people’s only interfaith engagement at CTF and these are not assessed, there should be opportunities for subsequent structured reflection for participants.

The students were very vocal about their disappointment in the lack of attention to other faiths in the majority of teaching in the CTF apart from the interfaith offerings from Woolf. Participants could only cite these examples: some Hebrew Bible modules interact with Jewish scholarship, one biblical scholar occasionally uses art by Muslims related to shared scriptural stories or themes, another biblical instructor occasionally invites a Jewish guest lecturer, and other faiths sometimes come up ‘incidentally’ in missions modules. The students articulated a disconnection between their learning about the importance of context in theology and the general inattention to the multifaith context of society. Students noted that different institutions in the CTF have differing interfaith

³³ See Appendix B for details of the event and discussion questions.

requirements, rather than there being shared expectations across the Federation. They said that inclusion of interfaith content and opportunities should cut across their training, instead of being exceptional. They gave many examples of where they believed there are obvious ‘missed opportunities’ for integration of interfaith content across the curriculum, including more attention to Judaism and Jewish interpretation in biblical studies, more attention to Christian Nationalism in ethical and pastoral studies, more attention to power dynamics in ministry and how this will impact their ministry and their interfaith engagement, attention to other beliefs and practices in the UK context in relation to pastoral care and spirituality, and giving students structured opportunities to discuss the relevance of any subject matter to interfaith relations (and the relevance of other faiths to that same subject matter). They felt that because those conversations are not facilitated or encouraged in the classroom, they are also not happening in any of the (arguably more formational) conversations outside of the classroom.

They were also vocal about their dismay at how some of their peers are dismissive about interfaith opportunities, and do the minimum required to ‘tick a box’. In their experience, some students only take abstract theological discourses seriously and consider interfaith opportunities less important. One student described how she had spoken with peers about the importance of interfaith, to which they said, ‘Oh, do you see that as your ministry?’, as if it were a niche calling. The student replied,

No, actually I think this is everyone’s ministry because it is everyone’s business. And everyone in your parish – if you’re going to be a parish priest, you will have cure of souls. Who are the souls in your parish? What is important in what is embedded within their own understanding of the meaning of the soul? How are you going to have that conversation? What are you going to do when you’ve got politics and mass immigration? How are you going to have that conversation with parishioners in your own church and your neighbours who are having disagreements?

Participants also lamented that students who do want to experience more interfaith encounters, and learn more about other faiths and interfaith relations, are unable to explore these opportunities because of their already packed timetables. They noted that some institution-specific requirements clashed with some interfaith opportunities. And although they were aware that many opportunities are available to them in Cambridge through Woolf, the Cambridge Interfaith Programme, and grassroots interfaith initiatives, they felt they did not have any capacity to explore these alongside meeting their training requirements.

These students were well aware that neither the time nor the resources currently exist to add many new interfaith events and opportunities into the curriculum or the formational pathways in the CTF. For example, in an ideal world, they would like to have a module together with people of other faiths who are studying in analogous institutions, but they understand how difficult this would be to achieve. However, it was clear to them that both the problem of insufficient interfaith opportunities and the problem of some dismissive attitudes towards interfaith could and should be addressed by more integration and less compartmentalisation of interfaith.

After hearing from the students, the staff participants reflected on what we are doing well in the CTF, how we can improve interfaith opportunities, and what steps we could agree to take after these conversations. It was agreed that the CTF is doing well, in terms of all the Common Awards

teaching institutions having a basic expectation that everyone will have some exposure to interfaith teaching or encounter during their time in the Federation. However, it was also agreed that it is entirely possible for students and staff to never have interfaith encounters during their time in the CTF, so staff participants were more eager to discuss what can be improved.

One overarching reflection was on the resonance between the research data and the reflections from CTF students in relation to the considerable appetite and expectations theological students have for interfaith opportunities. The CTF student participants voiced strong desires for more opportunities for interfaith encounters and more integration of attention to other faiths across the curriculum. The student participants were keenly aware of and deeply articulate about why other faiths matter in Christian theological education, and how absent attention to other faiths is in their experience of the Common Awards in the CTF.

Some of the reflections on how we could improve focused on our internal conversations and communication. It was suggested that staff should be more articulate about why there are interfaith requirements so that students are less likely to view it as a box to tick; there should be a context in which they are encouraged to think critically about why interfaith is part of their training, instead of just having a Director of Studies tell them they have to fulfil a requirement. Equally, students and staff who have positive experiences of interfaith encounter and examples of good practice should have forums in which to share these with colleagues.

Another focus of the reflections was the curriculum. There was agreement that awareness of other faiths in society, knowledge of historic interfaith relations, and attention to the views and experiences of people of other faiths is needed across theological education. Participants felt that the same intentional, structural reflection that is happening about decolonising the curriculum needs to happen on integrating interfaith understanding and opportunities – indeed, this should be seen as integrally related to decolonising the curriculum. They noted that this will require attention to both the curriculum and to the continuing professional development of instructors. One participant noted that some instructors ignore module learning outcomes related to other faiths ‘because it’s not my expertise’. There was a consensus amongst the participants that this level of change will require the involvement of Durham Common Awards centrally, noting how structural changes became possible in relation to decolonising the curriculum because they were centrally led and resourced.

Reflections also focused on placements. Participants noted that most placements do not have any interfaith element, which leaves students without the tools to reflect on, much less effectively engage in interfaith encounters in Christian ministry. It was agreed that staff should more carefully consider interfaith dimensions of contextual placements, as this is an already existing requirement where interfaith encounter could be integrated most easily and most meaningfully. This could include social context placements in explicitly interfaith organisations or initiatives, or church placements where ministry is responsive to a multifaith context or where a placement could include working together with neighbours of other faiths, or placements with multifaith chaplaincies such as hospitals, airports, and corporate chaplaincies. Some students in the CTF do placements in chapels of Cambridge colleges, and priority could be given to those where the chaplains are working on better multifaith provision.

When reflecting on the barriers and challenges to making improvements, there was an awareness that there was likely to be resistance due to perceptions that there is no time and there are no resources to devote to this. There was also realism that many colleagues may not have experience or expertise in other faiths or interfaith relations, so it may not be a priority for them. Participants acknowledged that it is easy to be complacent in the CTF about the Woolf Institute 'doing interfaith' for the Federation, instead of it being shared, prioritised, or integrated. And being in a Federation means that it is difficult to implement change across institutions. One participant who arranges placements in local churches lamented the relative lack of interfaith work in most parishes, and thus the limited interfaith opportunities during placements.

Following on from these reflections on the research, on current provision in the CTF, and on challenges faced in this context, the group agreed a set of actions to be pursued internally to begin addressing the gaps and barriers noted, and to seize the opportunities noted in our conversations.

Key takeaways

Several observations from the CTF reflective practice case study may be of value in other TEIs.

- Participants were appreciative of the opportunity to share their experiences and views, and to consider ways forward. Reflective practice was a helpful exercise which may be meaningfully adapted to other TEIs.
- The student participants strongly corroborated the research findings about students having high expectations of interfaith opportunities in theological education. They were articulate and incisive in their critiques and their constructive suggestions.
- The staff participants corroborated previous research studies' findings of common obstacles to interfaith provision in TEIs.
- Both students and staff strongly advocated for better integration of interfaith across the curriculum, and more opportunities for encounter, particularly through placements.
- Key challenge: ensuring safety, inclusion, and equitable experiences across identity characteristics and mode of study.

IV. Theology and Pedagogy

Elizabeth Phillips

In the project report thus far, we have focused empirical and reflexive attention on successively more specific contexts from UK higher education in the original Coventry study to Common Awards TEIs in the new data analysis and the Roundtable Discussion event, to the Cambridge Theological Federation in the case study. In this section, I will bring these findings and reflections into conversation with a broad range of literature on theological education, interfaith teaching and learning, and pedagogy. I will consider how literature across these topics address the importance of encounter with people of other faiths in Christian theological education, how interfaith encounter relates to the EDI and decolonising work being pursued by many theological educators, and how critical pedagogies can inform the work of putting into practice the connection between theologies of interfaith encounters and practical commitments to EDI and decolonising theological education.

Why theological education needs encounter with religious others

We have seen that it is not uncommon for theological educators to object to interfaith teaching and learning, preferring to focus on Christianity alone,³⁴ and for others to consider it another thing that is too difficult to fit into already ‘overcrowded curricula’ with limited time and resources.³⁵ Instructors with these concerns may be surprised to learn that some theologians and theological educators are arguing that interfaith opportunities should be at the heart of theological education rather than optional additions.

Jennifer Howe Peace argued in a collection of essays on interreligious education that interreligious relations should be central to theological education because they are also central to Christianity: ‘Rather than being merely tangential to faithful Christian life, how we understand and treat our religious neighbors is central to it.’³⁶ This is both a theological imperative, related to Christian love, and an ethical imperative, related to our shared histories. ‘Given both past and contemporary examples of communal violence, particularly where the lines of division are drawn in religious terms, I would argue that cultivating interreligious understanding among our future religious leaders is an ethical imperative.’³⁷

³⁴ Mumisa and Kessler, *The Training of Religious Leaders in the UK*, p. 11; Gaston and Brealey, *Interfaith Engagement and Theological Education*, p. 44.

³⁵ McCallum, *Integrating Islam*, pp. 3-4; Gaston and Brealey, *Interfaith Engagement and Theological Education*, p. 44. Awareness of these concerns within TEIs was also shared in our Roundtable Discussion Event and Reflective Practice Event.

³⁶ Jennifer Howe Peace, ‘Religious Self, Religious Other: Coformation as a Model for Interreligious Education’ in *Critical Perspectives on Interreligious Education: Experiments in Empathy*, ed. by Najeeba Syeed and Heidi Hadsell (Brill, 2020), pp. 201-219 (p. 204).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

Some may worry that important theological claims are threatened or called into question by centring encounter with religious others. However, 'Commitment to one's own faith tradition does not necessarily disqualify one from interfaith relationship-building. . . Valued sectarian identity in tandem with respect for the identity of others invites interfaith relationships built on authenticity, transparency, and trust.'³⁸

Learning about and witnessing other theologies in action does not require relativism, or any weakened commitment to particularly Christian truth claims. Instead, interfaith encounter allows students to grasp that *believing* something is true *about* God is different from *possessing* the truth that is God. Reuven Firestone, arguing that interreligious learning is a 'monotheistic imperative', said,

It was right to conclude, as our monotheist ancestors did, that in one creator God there exists an essential unity in the created universe, which continues to move it to this day. It was also correct to conclude that from this essential unity there is most likely an actual, single *Truth*. It is a mistake, however, to think that we can 'own' that truth, that anyone can truly know it.³⁹

And, far from threatening or weakening the particularity of faith, most participants in interfaith encounters find their own faith strengthened and refined. In a piece on interreligious pedagogy in theological education, Scott Alexander proposed a model of 'evangelical hospitality', which he called *encuentro* in honour of Latina/o theologies, and for which he drew inspiration from the Qur'an. Surat al-Hujurat, verse 13 includes a divine declaration to all humanity that 'We made you peoples and tribes that you may come to know one another.'

In this single verse, the Qur'an offers a profound insight into the mystery of diversity within the human family. It begins by maintaining that this diversity is not the result of happenstance but rather of divine design. It then supplies the divine rationale for this design: the opportunity for human beings to overcome their natural cognitive and affective sense of alienation-in-difference, not by focusing on difference as something to be avoided or denigrated, let alone as something to be employed as an excuse for mutual enmity, but precisely by engaging difference in a process of *encuentro*, or, to use the qur'anic language of this verse, *ta'aruf* . . . This last part of the verse also suggests that it is precisely through *encuentro* that the God-consciousness of all participants in the process is raised. To put it more simply and directly: *in the context of encountering the religious other in mutuality, one's own faith is not diminished, but edified and perfected.*⁴⁰

³⁸ Tony Richie, 'An Evangelical/Pentecostal Approach to Interfaith Education for Seminarians and University Students' in *Critical Perspectives on Interreligious Education: Experiments in Empathy*, ed. by Najeeba Syeed and Heidi Hadsell (Brill, 2020), pp. 174-200 (p. 196).

³⁹ Reuven Firestone and others, 'Interreligious Learning as Monotheist Imperative' in *Critical Perspectives on Interreligious Education: Experiments in Empathy*, ed. by Najeeba Syeed and Heidi Hadsell (Brill, 2020), pp. 33-45 (p. 41).

⁴⁰ Scott C. Alexander, 'Encountering the Religious 'Stranger': Interreligious Pedagogy and the Future of Theological Education', *Theological Education*, 51.2 (2018), pp. 49-61 (pp. 54-55).

In order to cultivate love of neighbour, attention to good relations with other faiths, and deepened Christian faith through engaging with other faiths, the imperative is specifically for interfaith *encounter*, rather than (or in addition to) instruction about other faiths.

If interfaith dialogue is to be effective in theological education, then it will foster relationships, overcome stereotypes, and increase appreciation for the inherent value of those others from whom we are willing to learn. In theological education, this means that we would need to engage with *real* people – students and faculty – people who are members of other religions, and not merely encounter their religious traditions as disembodied texts. We do this through meeting and greeting and engaging with and valuing each other as living, breathing, worthy beings. This is encapsulated in the famous teaching from the Jewish theologian Martin Buber, who said that ‘all real living is meeting.’ Buber explains that by doing this when we encounter another individual truly as a person and not as an object for use, we become fully human.⁴¹

In his encyclical ‘On the proclamation of the gospel in today’s world’, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis emphasised the importance of encountering one another in person in order to overcome the polarisation and tribalism that characterise so much of contemporary life. For Francis, the importance of encounter is grounded in the incarnation.

For just as some people want a purely spiritual Christ, without flesh and without the cross, they also want their interpersonal relationships provided by sophisticated equipment, by screens and systems which can be turned on and off on command. Meanwhile, the Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction.⁴²

Incarnational theological education needs opportunities for encounters with religious ‘others’ that subvert constructions of their ‘otherness’ by allowing us to see individuals with complex intersectional identities, like our own, instead of flattened, faith-based stereotypes.

One of the challenges of interfaith engagement is learning to see the religious other as a fellow human being, not merely a category like “Muslim” or “Hindu” or “evangelical.” . . . Not only does a focus on religious labels limit our ability to see a religious neighbor as a person and not just an other, it also fuels stereotypes about what “all” Muslims or Buddhists or Hindus are like. This limited focus eclipses the intersectionality of other differences (and similarities), including race, gender, and class. Just as religion is only one part of our identity

⁴¹ Sherril Gilbert, ‘Why Training in the Art of Interreligious Dialogue Is Necessary for Theological Education: Thinking about “Who Is My Neighbour?” from a Jewish Perspective’, *Journal of the Council for Research on Religion*, 4.2 (2023), pp.30-36 (p.32).

⁴² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html> [accessed 21 July 2026], p. 88.

as Christians (we [the authors] personally are also Americans, women, liberal arts professors, mothers, and wives), we need to recognize that this is also the case for our religious neighbors.⁴³

In order to recognise the complexity of religious others, as well as the complexities of diversity within each other system of beliefs and practices, students need to engage with people in addition to ideas.

Best practices of interfaith education are contextual and experiential, aiming to put a ‘face’ on religions so they are not explored in just an abstract, theoretically objective manner, but are experienced as constellations of values, beliefs, practices, and heritages that give meaning to the lives of people we know. These practices present the complexities and internal diversity within religious traditions. The necessarily self-reflective nature of the experiential practices can create the capacity for profound personal and society growth, which is essential to fostering and sustaining cultures of peace.⁴⁴

By cultivating love of neighbour, deepening faith, and fostering relations of peace, interfaith encounter is not so much about adding something new into theological education, but making good on the commitments most theological educators already share. Another widespread commitment in theological education, for which interfaith encounter is needed, is decolonising.

Decolonising theological education: encountering others without ‘othering’

Many institutions of theological education have committed to processes of decolonising their curriculum and practice. The Durham Common Awards, for example, have recognised that ‘the legacy of empire continues to shape how knowledge is produced, circulated and reproduced – not least in educational contexts.’ Therefore, they have committed to decolonising their curriculum, by which they mean, ‘reflecting on the content and delivery of our modules, identifying how they are shaped by that problematic legacy, and finding ways forward that move beyond it.’⁴⁵ Decolonising the practice of theological education, including and reaching beyond the curriculum, is a wider process within each TEI.

Identifying how curricula and practices are shaped by colonial legacies is a complex and sobering process, not a punctiliar list of tasks any institution can tick off in a single programme or time period. Willie James Jennings’s incisive book, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, considers the depth of this legacy and the breadth of its implications in theological education specifically, and

⁴³ Marion H. Larson and Sara L. H. Shady, *From Bubble to Bridge: Educating Christians for a Multifaith World* (IVP, 2016), p. 93.

⁴⁴ Tiffany Puett, ‘On Transforming Our World: Critical Pedagogy for Interfaith Education’, *CrossCurrents*, 55.2 (2005), p.265.

⁴⁵ ‘Decolonising the Curriculum Resources’, n.d., <<https://www.durham.ac.uk/departments/academic/common-awards/policies-processes/curriculum/decolonisation/>> [accessed 21 July 2026].

Western education generally. Jennings describes how colonialism has shaped our imaginations of the goal and the context of education, resulting in ‘distorted formation’.

The distortion is woven into theological institutions and into our deepest pedagogical impulses. . . It is a distortion that forms between two things. On one side there is an image of an educated person that propels the curricular, pedagogical, and formational energies of Western education, and especially theological education. That image is of a white self-sufficient man, his self-sufficiency defined by possession, control, and mastery. On the other side, many people respond to that image by promoting a homogeneity that aims toward a cultural nationalism. . . Theological education in the West was born in white hegemony and homogeneity, and it continues to baptize homogeneity, making it holy and right and efficient—when it is none of these things. “Hegemony” and “homogeneity” are words that mean control and sameness, a control that aims for sameness and a sameness that imagines control. Crudely put, theological education vacillates between a pedagogical imagination calibrated to forming white self-sufficient men and a related pedagogical imagination calibrated to forming a Christian racial and cultural homogeneity that yet performs the nationalist vision of that same white self-sufficient man.⁴⁶

While many TEIs have embarked on initiatives of decolonising and/or EDI (equality/equity, diversity, and inclusion), these efforts tend to focus on race, ethnicity, gender, dis/ability, and (in some spaces) sexuality. None of the participants in our roundtable discussion had observed in their TEIs any connection between these efforts and religious diversity.⁴⁷ While this is understandable, as most EDI efforts are primarily internal and these are single-faith institutions, it may perhaps also indicate inattention to the particular ways colonialism constructed non-Christian others, and how this goes hand in hand with colonising, exclusion, and inequality. Jennings describes how colonialism constructed the categories of race, religion, and nationality that have divided peoples and determined power structures ever since.

Those Christian colonialists moving back and forth between old and new worlds and between the conquest sites of the new worlds saw what few people had ever seen before—a vast array of peoples spanning heretofore incomprehensible distances, differences, and ways of living. In response to that sight and in light of their unquestioned power in those new places, these colonialists organized peoples in thought and space, and set in place a way to gather people that we are yet to escape, and maybe can never escape. Race, religion, and nation formed in that gathering work, each itself an unwanted conceptual gathering crafted in the power of whiteness. These forms of designation were unwanted because they were unnecessary for peoples who knew who they were in relation to the land, to animals, and to their gods, and how they were in relation to other peoples. But race, religion, and nation became useful designations for theft, inside the work of separating peoples from the land. People groups have always existed, but it was not until the modern colonial moment that those peoples were forced to think themselves in the troubled togetherness of race,

⁴⁶ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (SPCK, 2020), pp. 6-7.

⁴⁷ See p. 26, above.

religion, and nation in a world being stolen, privatized, segmented, segregated, commoditized, and bordered. . . Western education and modern theological education were formed in this condition without entering into lament over its harmful effects; indeed, we became the means through which untold generations were shaped to think inside these troubled forms of gathering and the facilitating obsession of whiteness with its relentless need to perform its indispensability.⁴⁸

Many participants in our Roundtable Discussion Event and Reflective Practice Event said that attention to other faith communities and to religious diversity should be part of decolonising and EDI initiatives.⁴⁹ If efforts to decolonise theological education and to promote equity, inclusion, and diversity are to address the depth and breadth of the colonising imagination that has formed the theological academy, they will equip staff and students for decolonised, non-patriarchal encounters with non-Christians.

This isn't a call to a condescending love based on superiority but a love that comes out of a radical humility and openness rooted in an understanding of the revelation of God in Christ. . . recentring on an understanding of the call of Christ through engagement with other faith traditions from the periphery of Eurocentrism's domination.⁵⁰

Decolonising theological education points away from formation that props up Christianity as a power over other systems of belief and practice, and towards formation in which students are able to analyse and address the power dynamics between faith groups created by the colonial legacy.

Interfaith education has an important role to play in the search for new methods of education that will advance broad social transformation, shifting away from a paradigm of dominance, exclusiveness, and violence and toward a new paradigm of equity, inclusiveness, and peace. . . Interfaith education finds its greatest challenges in addressing the hegemonic tendencies of religions, through which one tradition has dominated another; the histories of violence found within many of our religious traditions; and the exclusivist and triumphalist strands within religious traditions that promote intolerance and discrimination. There is a need to acknowledge the role of power both among and within religious traditions.⁵¹

These power dynamics include 'Christian privilege', which is much overlooked in contexts where theological educators may be focused on worries about their declining student numbers and theological students may be worried about the declining numbers of people and resources in the churches they are training to lead. In such contexts there may be inattention to the 'inherent advantages' Christians continue to receive because, even where Christians are no longer a majority

⁴⁸ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, pp. 136-137.

⁴⁹ See pp. 26 and 31, above.

⁵⁰ Ray Gaston, *Faith, Hope and Love: Interfaith Engagement as Practical Theology* (SCM Press, 2017), pp. 52-53.

⁵¹ Tiffany Puett, 'On Transforming Our World', pp. 265, 268.

in the population, it remains true that ‘Christianity is deeply interwoven into the structure of society’.⁵²

Whether or not we feel privileged, being a Christian is recognized by many as a form of privilege in our society. Not only is religious identity itself a basis of privilege (or lack thereof), religion also intersects with class, racial and cultural background, gender, and sexuality in shaping our social standing. Interfaith events, like any civic activity, don’t typically take place on a level playing field.⁵³

One participant in the Roundtable Discussion event in this project objected to aligning attention to religious diversity in society with attention to EDI within theological TEIs.⁵⁴ This objection requires our attention, as it highlighted the critical importance of not proposing or creating new initiatives or processes which overshadow, or divert attention or resources from the current, ongoing work of EDI in theological education. While students continue the crucial processes of recognising white privilege and male privilege, decolonising will also recognise the intersection of these and other forms of privilege with the colonial powers of Christianity and their legacies.

Interreligious education seeks to identify and interrogate the pervasive Christian and white privilege in interreligious and intercultural life. Even when homogeneity appears to exist, for instance in an entirely Christian or an entirely Muslim classroom, deep differences do exist and need the appropriate spaces to present themselves. . . . As we work to lift up the dynamics of tension between narratives and make visible the stories, realities, and histories that have been buried through the centering of colonial narratives, we must also work to deconstruct dangerous binaries. The two most common binaries that work against the cultivation of holistic identities are the racial binary of Black and white and the religious binary of Christian and other.⁵⁵

Critical Pedagogies and Theological Education

Decolonising theological education, and attending to all vital aspects of EDI and their intersectionality can seem like a nearly impossible task if we consider, with Jennings and others, how deep and wide colonial legacies are in Western education. But there are many important resources for theological education beyond the theological academy, and some have proposed that

⁵² Marianne Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other: Ricoeur and the Fragility of Interreligious Encounters* (Studies in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur, Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 355.

⁵³ Larson and Shady, *From Bubble to Bridge*, p. 96.

⁵⁴ See pp. 26-27, above.

⁵⁵ Christine J. Hong, ‘Interreligious Education: Transnational and Trans Spiritual Identity Formation in the Classroom’ in *Critical Perspectives on Interreligious Education: Experiments in Empathy*, ed. by Najeeba Syeed and Heidi Hadsell (Brill, 2020), pp. 46-65 (p. 59, 62).

critical pedagogies are particularly pertinent for theological educators aiming towards decolonial, anti-racist, inclusive formation.

Well before contemporary initiatives of decolonising and EDI were discussed within TELs, educators like Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and bell hooks were theorising and creating new pedagogies. Recognising the complex interrelations between knowledge, power, experience, authority, agency, and politics, these authors and practitioners promoted critical pedagogies aimed at subverting oppressive enactments of these dynamics in education, and empowering learners for personal and social transformation. In *Living Black Theology: Decolonizing Knowledge*, Anthony Reddie reflected on the implications of *After Whiteness* for the Common Awards.⁵⁶ He also described the importance of critical pedagogies for his analysis of racism and other colonial legacies in theological education, and his development of a method for addressing them, which he calls 'Performative action'.

The notion of Performative action works on the basis that participants will work in collaboration with others, engaging cooperatively in order that in their joint interactions, what will emerge is new forms of learning that will transform the critical thinking of all participants. This form of engagement affirms mutuality, cooperation, and a shared commitment to the production of new knowledge. The production of new knowledge is not simply for participants to pass exams and to gain assessment; rather, the desire is to create new forms of knowing for the express purpose of changing behaviour and developing better praxis in terms of the experiential skills for engaging with the 'Other'. The aim of this work is the development of anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and non-discriminatory forms of Christian discipleship. The liberative praxis of performative action is one that sees difference as something to celebrate rather than a pejorative that enshrines our worst fears of the Other.⁵⁷

Tiffany Puett has described how these pedagogies might inform interfaith encounter, suggesting that 'interfaith educators should seek out aspects of critical pedagogy that would illuminate the challenges and support the tasks of transformative interfaith education, creating a critical interfaith pedagogy'.⁵⁸

Paulo Freire, whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was a seminal text in the formation of critical pedagogies, argued against 'banking education', in which instructors impart knowledge to students, and in favour of embracing the potential of education to enable students to engage with the world critically, contributing to social change.

Critical pedagogy, for Freire, was imagining literacy as not simply the mastering of specific skills but also a mode of intervention, a way of learning about and reading the word as a basis for intervening in the world. It was not about the task of memorizing so-called facts, decontextualized and unrelated to present conditions. To the contrary, it was about offering

⁵⁶ Anthony Reddie, *Living Black Theology: Decolonizing Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, 2025), chapter 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 143.

⁵⁸ Puett, 'On Transforming Our World', p. 270.

a way of thinking beyond the seeming naturalness or inevitability of the current state of things, challenging assumptions validated by “common sense,” soaring beyond the immediate confines of one’s experiences, entering into a critical dialogue with history, and imagining a future that would not merely reproduce the present.⁵⁹

In order to achieve this shift, critical pedagogies advocate educational contexts in which ‘knowledge is not simply received by students, but actively transformed, open to be challenged, and related to the self as an essential step towards agency, self-representation, and learning how to govern rather than simply be governed.’⁶⁰

According to Giroux, critical pedagogies seek to ‘become more attentive to the ways in which institutional forces and cultural power are tangled up with everyday experience.’⁶¹ Just as in the educational contexts Giroux addressed, the everyday experiences of teaching, learning, and formation within TELs constitute a pedagogy that is ‘a moral and political practice’.

Far from innocent, pedagogical practices operate within institutional contexts that carry great power in determining which knowledge is of most worth, what it means for students to know something, and how such knowledge relates to a particular understanding of the self and its relationship to both others and the future. Connecting teaching as knowledge production to teaching as a form of self-production, pedagogy not only presupposes an ethical and political project that offers up a variety of human capacities; it also propagates diverse meanings of the social. Moreover, as an articulation of and intervention in the social, pedagogical practices always sanction particular versions of which knowledge is of most worth, what it means to know something, how to be attentive to the operations of power, and how we might construct representations of ourselves, others, and our physical environment.⁶²

As Freire put it, ‘Education never was, is not, and never can be neutral or indifferent in regard to the reproduction of the dominant ideology or the interrogation of it.’⁶³ If, as argued by the authors considered here, theological education has been profoundly shaped by valuing the kinds of knowledge and the ways of being that bolstered colonialism, particularly knowledge as mastery and formation as othering, critical pedagogies are especially well suited to analysing these legacies and providing ways forward.

⁵⁹ Henry A. Giroux, ‘Rethinking Education as the Practice of Freedom: Paulo Freire and the Promise of Critical Pedagogy’, *Policy Futures in Education*, 8.6 (2010), pp.178-179.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁶³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. by Myra Bergman Ramos (Continuum, 2005), p. 91.

Critical pedagogies can help us analyse what kinds of formation theological education is assuming and promoting. TELs are not only teaching content, they are modelling what does and does not matter, and how.

What critical pedagogy does insist upon is that education cannot be neutral. It is inevitably a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge, values, desires, and identities are produced within particular sets of class and social relations. Moreover, it is always directive in its attempt to teach students to inhabit a particular mode of agency; enable them to understand the larger world and one's role in it in a specific way; define their relationship, if not responsibility, to diverse others; and experience in the classroom some sort of understanding of a more just, imaginative, and democratic life.⁶⁴

Critical pedagogies can help cultivate learning environments that are both 'safe spaces' for students to be themselves, and sites of 'provocative encounters', in the terms of the Coventry interfaith study. Lucy Peacock's new analysis of the data highlighted how different groups of students felt more and less safe, and experienced provocative encounters differently, within Common Awards TELs.⁶⁵ These pedagogies can help instructors be alert to and address such inequities.

Such a pedagogy also must bear the responsibility of being self-conscious about those forces that sometimes prevent people from speaking openly and critically, whether they are part of a hidden curriculum of racism, class oppression, or gender discrimination, or part of those institutional and ideological mechanisms that silence students under the pretext of a claim to professionalism, objectivity, or unaccountable authority. Crucial here is the recognition that a pedagogical culture of questioning is not merely about the dynamics of communication, but also about the effects of power and the mechanisms through which it constrains, denies, or excludes particular forms of agency—preventing some individuals from speaking in specific ways, in particular spaces, under specific circumstances.⁶⁶

Critical pedagogies encourage curiosity rather than mastery, and openness to others rather than 'othering'. They relate to both knowledge and unknowing, and to both the self and the other, in radically different ways from colonial formation.

I feel myself secure because there is no reason to be ashamed that there may be something I do not know. To live in openness toward others and to have an open-ended curiosity toward life and its challenges is essential to educational practice. To live this openness toward others respectfully and, from time to time, when opportune, critically reflect on this

⁶⁴ Henry A. Giroux, 'Rethinking Education', p. 183.

⁶⁵ See pp. 13ff., above.

⁶⁶ Giroux, 'Higher Education', p. 144.

openness ought to be an essential part of the adventure of teaching. The ethical, political, and pedagogical basis of this openness confers on the dialogue that it makes possible a singular richness and a beauty. The experience of openness as a founding moment of our unfinishedness leads us to the knowledge and awareness of that unfinishedness. It would be impossible to know ourselves as unfinished and not to open ourselves to the world and to others in search of an explanation or a response to a multitude of questions. Closing ourselves to the world and to others is a transgression of the natural condition of incompleteness. The person who is open to the world or to others inaugurates thus a dialogical relationship with which restlessness, curiosity, and unfinishedness are confirmed as key moments within the ongoing current of history.⁶⁷

The openness cultivated by critical pedagogies may resonate with calls to reimagine where interfaith education is located in the curriculum. As seen in the literature review and the contextual events in this project, current approaches to other faiths often focus on instruction about abstracted belief systems and/or theological conversations surrounding soteriology. Critical pedagogies can help us consider how encounters with people of other faiths, in their complexity, diversity, and embodied practices can be cultivated in theological education, while also attending to the diversity of theologies of mission within Christianity and particular student groups.

In practice, a variety of encounter opportunities can offer ‘multiple entry points and levels of commitment to honour the range of goals and experiences’ of students, which may range from one-off events, to full modules, to year-long encounter programmes.⁶⁸ Longer programmes may include shared activities such as studying sacred texts together and visiting one another’s sacred spaces and gatherings.⁶⁹ Or they may include social engagements focused on shared interests, whether those are arts or sports, or social concerns like the climate crisis. Or they may involve shared community service projects, which can also cultivate ‘empathy across racial and economic lines in addition to faith lines’.⁷⁰

Critical pedagogies cultivate not only a disposition of openness and curiosity, but also skills for how to listen curiously to one another. As bell hooks said, ‘we must intervene to alter the existing pedagogical structure and to teach students *how to listen, how to hear one another*’.⁷¹ The openness cultivated by these pedagogies is also always critical; students ‘learn how to engage others in critical

⁶⁷ Freire, ‘Pedagogy’, pp. 120-121.

⁶⁸ Peace, ‘Religious Self, Religious Other’, p. 211.

⁶⁹ Gaston, *Faith, Hope and Love*, p. 41.

⁷⁰ Larson and Shady, *From Bubble to Bridge*, p. 93.

⁷¹ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge, 1994), p. 150.

dialogue and be held accountable for their views' and are 'able to come to terms with their own power'.⁷²

Critical dialogue carefully attends to both commonalities and differences. '[W]hile underscoring our shared humanity and the dignity that affords each of us, an important counterbalance is to dive deep into the irreducible differences that distinguish communities and individuals' because 'these differences are to be safeguarded and celebrated rather than erased or flattened.'⁷³

In critical dialogue, the power dynamics between students and instructors, between fellow students, and between students and participants from other faith communities will always need sustained attention.

Interreligious learning never takes place in a vacuum. Rather than assuming that interreligious learning on campus occurs in a safe space where participants meet as equals, educators should examine how the context in which they establish interreligious activities impacts the power relations between those who participate.⁷⁴

The openness and the attention to power encouraged in critical pedagogies are often best achieved outside the classroom, particularly in relation to interfaith encounters. Marion Larson and Sara Shady emphasised in their book on 'educating Christians for a multifaith world', that visiting other religious communities has a very different effect to inviting speakers from other faiths to teach in our classrooms. It disrupts the power dynamic inherent in inviting others into our spaces, and puts students in the role of guests rather than hosts. 'Walking into a new place for the first time, we naturally seek to show respect, patience, kindness, and generosity to our hosts. These attitudes help us to be more receptive listeners and humble learners.' Although this may be uncomfortable for some, 'physically inhabiting a space that makes us feel awkward and uncertain can lead us to respond differently than we might in a familiar classroom setting. Instead of taking on an attitude of debate' students may be more able to 'realize that we need to listen quietly before responding.'⁷⁵ And, in visiting a setting where their religion is not the majority, students may 'begin to develop empathy for what it feels like to be in the minority position.' However, visits to other faith communities should not reinforce us/them power dynamics by enacting 'academic voyeurism'. Rather, they should be marked by 'reflective commitment, imaginative empathy, and receptive humility' in which participants are mutually 'willing to share, learn, and make mistakes.'⁷⁶

⁷² Giroux, 'Rethinking Education', pp. 179, 181.

⁷³ Peace, 'Religious Self, Religious Other', p. 206.

⁷⁴ Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, p. 354.

⁷⁵ Larson and Shady, *From Bubble to Bridge*, p. 90.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

Key takeaways

Why theological education needs encounter with religious others

- To better cultivate love of neighbour.
- To attend to histories of violence, and to build peace.
- To deepen and refine Christian faith.
- To encounter real, complex, diverse people incarnationally, rather than flattened, disembodied categories and stereotypes.

Why decolonising and EDI initiatives need interfaith encounter

- Because theological education itself was formed by colonialism.
- Because colonialism constructed the religious 'other' and divided peoples by race, religion, and nationality.
- Because religious diversity is often missing from EDI.
- Because there are power dynamics at work between Christianity and other faiths.

How critical pedagogies can help

- They can help identify and address power imbalances and colonial legacies in theological education.
- They aim towards formation of students who can engage critically and compassionately with the world.
- They can promote both 'safe spaces' and 'provocative encounters'.
- They cultivate dispositions and skills of openness and curiosity as well as critical analysis of self, others, and power dynamics.
- They can help us reimagine where other faiths fit in theological education, and how to encounter them inside and beyond the classroom.

V. Recommendations

Elizabeth Phillips and Lucy Peacock

Bringing together previous studies on interfaith opportunities in theological education in the UK, the Coventry study and our new analysis of that data, as well as wider literature on interfaith encounter, theological education, and pedagogies, we offer the following recommendations.

For theological educators:

- Seek a balance of ‘safe space’ and ‘provocative encounter’ in your classrooms; creating structured opportunities for difficult dialogue will enable students to engage constructively with disagreement across theological, political and social differences, equipping them with skills for respectful disagreement.
- Consider how interfaith encounter can be integrated into across subjects, for examples:
 - Biblical studies: encounter Jewish scholars of Hebrew Bible; encounter Muslims with shared narratives in the Qur’an; explore how scripture has been interpreted in relation to other faiths.
 - Doctrine, ethics, and history: explore how Christian doctrine and historical practices have contributed to good and bad relations with other faiths; encounter scholars and practitioners from other faiths on related doctrines and practices; include interfaith concerns in topics related to society and politics (e.g. pluralism, Christian nationalism).
 - Practical and pastoral theologies: consider the relevance of ministry in multifaith contexts for all subjects; encounter practices of pastoral and practical theology in other faith communities; explore perspectives from chaplains and others working in multifaith contexts; where there are placement components to your teaching, prioritise multifaith contexts.
- Where possible, provide opportunities for students to visit other contexts to meet faith communities living out their faith. Always be aware of power dynamics, and discourage tourism and voyeuristic excursions.
- Be aware that interfaith encounter can have negative impacts when there is insufficient literacy, attention to power dynamics, and/or effort to meet students where they are.
- Consider how critical pedagogies can shape these efforts, and be integrated into teaching and learning across the curriculum. Encourage students to question assumptions, examine power relations, and connect theology with lived experiences.

For TEIs:

- Raise awareness in your TEI of the high expectations students have for interfaith opportunities in their theological education.

- Embrace the importance of interfaith encounter for everyone in your TEI, rather than seeing it as one person's remit or 'outsourcing' to an interfaith institution or organisation. Consider how staff training days can be used to build competency and shared responsibility.
- Consider how interfaith encounter fits within your TEI's efforts to decolonise theological education; to promote equity, inclusion, and diversity; and to practise contextual theology. Do not divert attention or resources from existing initiatives, rather integrate religious diversity into them.
- Aim to offer and/or signpost multiple types of interfaith encounters (theological conversations, informal socialising, shared social action, etc.) with a variety of entry points and commitment levels (one-off events, full modules, year-long groups, etc.).
- Don't be put off by feeling there aren't enough resources or time for new interfaith initiatives; rather, integrate them into current provision. For just a few examples:
 - Interfaith encounters can be integrated into any subject in theological education. You don't need to create new modules so much as explore the relevance to interfaith history and contemporary multifaith society in existing modules.
 - Students can be signposted to existing initiatives, like local grassroots interfaith groups, or community organising (e.g. Citizens UK).
 - Existing aspects of formation can include interfaith encounter, especially placements (e.g. prioritise placement contexts where interfaith work is being done or there are opportunities to cultivate encounter).
- Consider organising a Reflective Practice event adapted from the CTF case study in order to assess the strengths, gaps, and possibilities for interfaith encounter in your TEI. Be sure to agree concrete actions during the event.

For the Common Awards:

- Opportunities for interfaith encounter should be included as an important aspect of decolonising the curriculum, and of preparing students for navigating equity, diversity, and inclusion in a multifaith society.
- Given the common obstacles faced within TEIs, guidance and resources are needed from the Common Awards centrally so that student expectations and needs can be met across TEIs.
- Consider how TEIs might be encouraged to collaborate, especially sharing resources between TEIs rich in interfaith resources and contacts and TEIs in less diverse and/or less well-resourced areas.

For further research:

- A key area where further research and recommendations are needed, according to findings in this study, is how encounter opportunities can be cultivated for online and other non-residential or dispersed student groups.
- It would be valuable to undertake longitudinal research. Following students into ministry and other professions could examine how theological education influences long-term vocational practice, leadership, and engagement with diverse communities.

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Appendix A: Roundtable Discussion Event

Interfaith Encounter in Theological Education: A Roundtable Conversation for Common Awards TEI's Thursday 13 November 12.00-13.30 (online)

What can Common Awards TEIs learn from recent research on interfaith learning and experiences in theological education? Should interfaith encounter be considered an aspect of diversity and inclusion initiatives within theological education? Join us to consider and discuss these questions as part of the Woolf Institute's Interfaith Encounter in Theological Education project, funded by a Durham Common Awards Seedcorn Grant.

Roundtable participants will be the first to see a new analysis of the data in the recent Coventry University project, *Interfaith Learning in Christian and Muslim Higher education Colleges* (2025), led by Professor Kristin Aune and Dr Lucy Peacock. We will then reflect together on the implications for theological education in Common Awards TEIs generally, and participants' TEIs specifically, led by Dr Elizabeth Phillips. Themes from these conversations will inform the final project report.

Outline:

12.00 Introduction (Beth Phillips)

Brief project overview and outline of the event

12.10 The Coventry Report (Kristin Aune)

Brief overview of the original findings as they relate to this project

12.20 New analysis of the data (Lucy Peacock)

12.35 Facilitated discussion (Beth Phillips)

- What strikes you as most significant in this research for theological education in Common Awards TEIs?
- Is interfaith encounter understood as part of diversity and inclusion in your institution? Do you think it should be? Why or why not?
- What implications does this research have for your own work and your institution?

1.20 Closing remarks (Beth Phillips)

1.30 End

Appendix B: Reflective Practice Event

9 March 2026, Woolf Institute

11am	Arrivals at the Woolf Institute Introductions, overview of the event
11.15am	Discussion of the research, drawing out key points for the CTF • Original Coventry report • New Woolf data analysis for Common Awards TEIs • Roundtable Discussion Event and Literature Review • Current CTF practice
12.00pm	Lunch
12.30pm	Student reflections and discussion • What stands out to you from the research and conversation thus far? • Do you have additional experiences of interfaith encounter within the CTF we have not discussed? • What do you appreciate about opportunities for interfaith encounter in the CTF? • What do you think could be improved in interfaith encounter opportunities in the CTF? How?
1pm	Brief break (students may leave at this point or stay on after the break)
1.10pm	Staff reflections and discussion • In light of the research and discussion thus far, what are we doing well in the CTF? • What are some key growth areas in relation to interfaith encounter and equipping students for religious diversity in their current/future contexts? • What are concrete steps we could take now, and what are the appropriate channels?
2pm	Conclusion



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