

Validation partnership announced

Last July the Synod passed a motion at the end of a debate on the implications for ordination training of higher education funding changes. In February the Bishop of Sheffield gave a presentation and took questions on the work done since July. I now attach for information a copy of a press release announcing a new validation partnership that the Archbishops' Council has agreed to enter into with Durham University.

William Fittall

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Secretary General

GENERAL SYNOD

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The Church of England and Durham University have announced a partnership to provide validation for the education of ministers.

Following recent approval from the University Senate and the Archbishops' Council, detailed negotiations will continue with a view to a new suite of awards starting in 2014.

The Church of England currently has around 1,200 men and women at 23 colleges and courses in programmes of ministerial education. In addition there are others preparing for lay ministries, such as Readers and evangelists, as well as candidates for ministry from other Churches being educated in the same or similar institutions.

The agreement potentially extends to a wide range of initial ministerial education for both clergy and other ministers and offers national coverage. The partnership is intended to include the colleges and courses. At present these have a range of individual validation partners. Changes in government policy for funding Higher Education have affected these arrangements. The Church of England is therefore seeking secure provision for the future through a dedicated common provider for all the courses and colleges.

The University will be responsible for granting the awards and for overseeing their assessment and regulation. Under a scheme called ValidationPlus, they will also support the colleges and courses through web-based provision and the services of expert staff based in the Theology and Religious Studies Department.

Durham University has a similar partnership arrangement with KPMG, a leading accountancy and consultancy firm. The ethos of the programme is research-led education of those called to lead in their field.

The appointment process generated considerable interest in the partnership and a large number of bids were received. The criteria for selection included:

- sympathy with the aims and objectives of the Church of England and its partner Churches and familiarity with the contexts served by the Churches;
- commitment to the partnership evidenced at the highest level within the institution(s);
- proven expertise in the teaching of Theology and Religious Studies normally evidenced through an active TRS department;
- proven expertise in the validation of programmes of study for other professions ideally on a national scale;
- best value for money both in terms of initial costs and over the projected five year term of the contract.

The Rt Revd Graham James, Bishop of Norwich and Chair of the Ministry Council of the Church of England, said, "We were impressed with all the bids we received and are delighted to be working with Durham on this exciting project. As a University with a high quality department of theology and a track record in validation, Durham is an ideal partner for both the Ministry Division and the colleges and courses."

Professor Chris Higgins, Vice-Chancellor of Durham University, said: “Durham is exceptionally well placed to work with the Church in this way because of our world position in theology and religion, and our considerable experience over 100 years of close partnership in ministerial training through St John’s College and indeed at an earlier stage, St Chad’s College.

“Our history, our current expertise and our long-term sustainability provides a fruitful soil to cultivate such a partnership.

“We look forward to working with the Church of England on this proposed partnership as we continue to develop the world-leading teaching, research and training available in theology and religion at Durham.”

The new arrangements are intended to make validation simpler and more affordable for the sector. The new provision will bring greater coherence to the training and education offered across the colleges, courses and dioceses.

The introduction of the new awards will not affect the education of those already in colleges and courses, which will continue to operate as at present. Current students will be able to continue their studies without interruption and should be reassured that their preparation for ministry will not be impaired. Where necessary, interim arrangements for validation will be made in order to ensure this.

The arrangement will potentially be available for the training of lay ministers, including Readers, and for other individuals who wish to study with a view to serving the Church.

Work on the awards will continue into 2013 and will be led by a group chaired by the Bishop of Sheffield. Colleagues from the Baptist, Methodist and United Reformed Churches will continue to participate with the intention of sharing in the awards in due course. The Methodist Church report on ministerial and lay training “The Fruitful Field” refers to the proposed validation partnership as an element in its future provision.