

Prospective UK undergraduate attitudes towards Theology and Religious Studies

Jeremy H. Kidwell

Introduction

The process by which pupils in British schools formulate their interest and eventually apply for study at University is something of a black box. We have access to UCAS statistics on student choice of programmes, but beyond this, not very much is known about what subjects students are interested in and what dampening or motivating effects might be in play behind the scenes as they navigate the transition from school to University.

At the same time that there is increasing pressure on admissions, it is also the case that in the particular case of theology and religious studies, societal perceptions and framings of religion are shifting in significant ways. Pointing to a variety of phenomena, like vicarious or everyday religion, or the increasing interest in spirituality and new religious movements, scholars have suggested that we have emerged in a post-secular social landscape, which is not less religious (as secularisation theorists might have expected), but often quite sharply *differently religious*. Research into youth and religion has shown that experience of religious devotion and participation can act with some of the same dynamics for young people as it does for adults.

Working off the expectation that people are interfacing with theology and religion in different ways, we sought to explore in this study how these shifts might be seen to inflect undergraduate admissions in Theology and Religious Studies (“TRS”) programmes. We theorised that young people in the UK aged 16 - 18 might actually be interested in studying this topic, but that their interests might have shifted into differently framed definitions and expectations from previous generations. Gathering this knowledge will be crucial for faculty involved in designing academic programmes and UG recruitment in TRS, especially as there is a broader government push to shift enrollments for students from the humanities to STEM subjects.

Survey Instrument

For this research, we conducted a survey of prospective undergraduate students in the UK, aged 16-19. The survey instrument was designed by Paul Ashby and Jeremy Kidwell at the

University of Birmingham, with helpful input from other colleagues at Birmingham: Amy Daughton, Jagbir Jhutti-Johal, Carissa Sharp, Rachael Shillitoe and Karen Wenell. Survey data was collected via online survey by TSR Insight and delivered to members of the online platform “The Student Room” which was open from 21st June and 4th July 2021. The resulting dataset is a random sample of 933 complete survey results from UK students (aged 16-18) in years 11, 12 and 13.¹ All responses were anonymous.

The start of the survey deployed three additional sifting questions: (1) we asked respondents their age, with results from “15 and under” and “prefer not to say” excluded and (2) we asked students about their most recent year of study, with responses that were not Y11-Y13 excluded. Excluded categories also included “I am currently on a gap year,” “I am currently on an undergraduate / HE college course,” “I am in full-time employment” (readers can find the full list of excluded response categories in Appendix A). The final sifting question asked respondents “Are you considering or planning to go to university in the future?” and responses of “no” or “prefer not to say” were excluded. The resulting sample only included respondents who reported themselves as pupils in school aged 16-19 who were considering going to University in the future.

Demographics

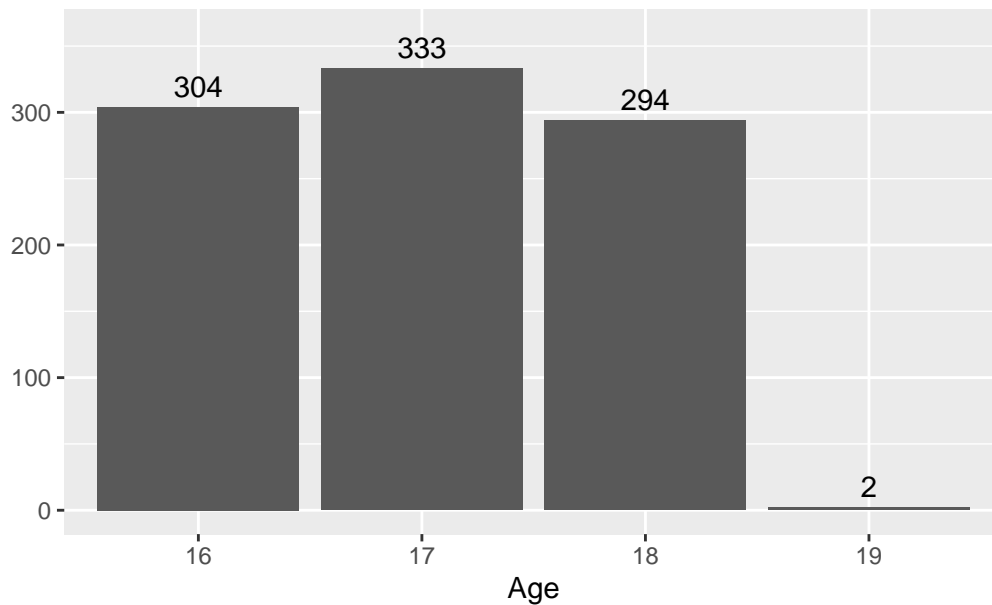


Figure 1: Respondent Age Distribution

¹The raw data from this survey is freely available under an open access license and can be found at (<https://zenodo.org/records/10673332>). Readers can also find the original survey instrument within the zenodo repository. This paper has also been written as reproducible research using Quarto and code which compiles as the article can be found at (https://github.com/kidwellj/trs_admissions_survey2021).

The sample was distributed evenly across the age cohorts with around 300 responses from each category, shown in Figure 1. We also asked respondents to self-identify their gender (Figure 2), ethnic group (Figure 3) and religion (Figure 4).

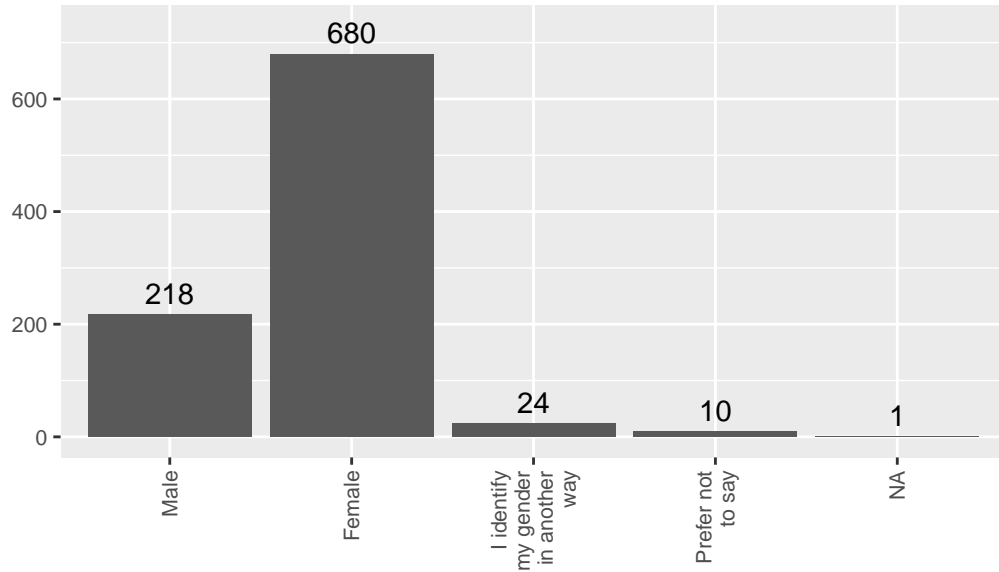


Figure 2: Respondent Gender Self-Identification Distribution

Survey Responses

We asked respondents to tell us about their attitudes towards a variety of subjects. To ensure reliability of the results, subjects were presented in a random order and there was no priming to indicate that the survey was meant to elicit attitudes towards any specific subject. Towards this end, we asked respondents to rank on a likert scale, their reaction to three statements, “I have a good understanding of what this subject involves,” “I would be interested in studying this subject at University,” and then to rank 1-5 their perception of whether each subject represented “Good employability prospects” or “Poor employability prospects”.

Understanding of subjects

We’ve plotted these results in Figure 5 as a diverging bar chart centred on neutral responses, so that negative and positive visually diverge in clear ways. The bottom of the list represents those where respondents were on average, less confident that they understood what study of the subject might involve. It is perhaps not surprising to see that subjects which are universally studied in school like “math,” “english” and “history” were considered well-understood. It is interesting to note, however, that while respondents were confident that they knew what “Religious Studies” involved (60% were “strongly agree” or “agree”), these results were inverted

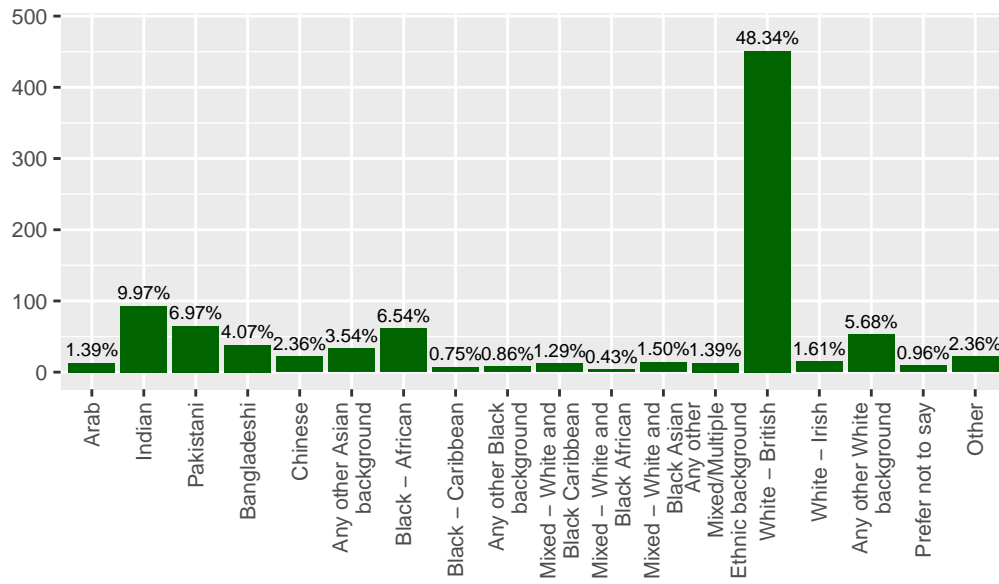


Figure 3: Respondent Ethnicity

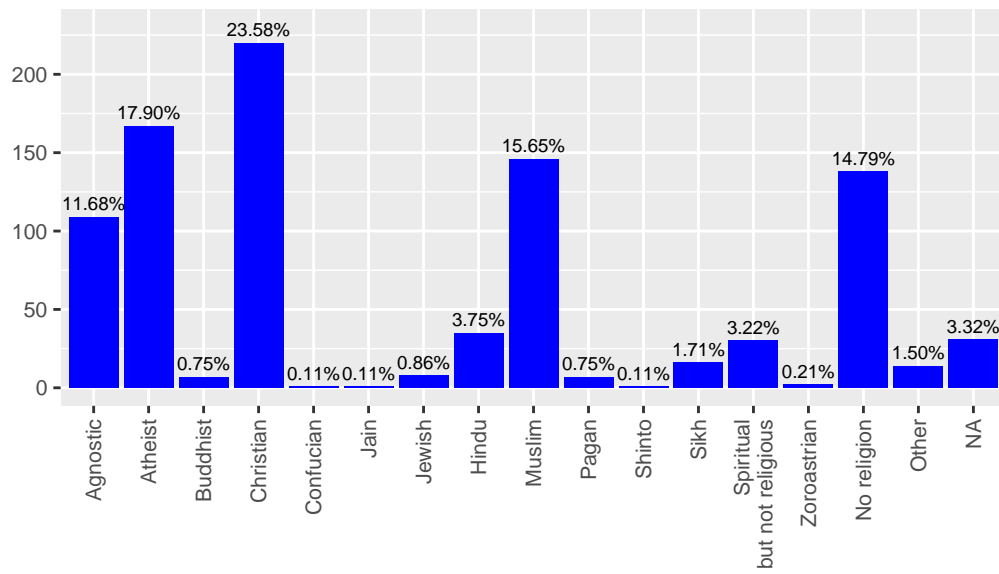


Figure 4: Respondent Religion

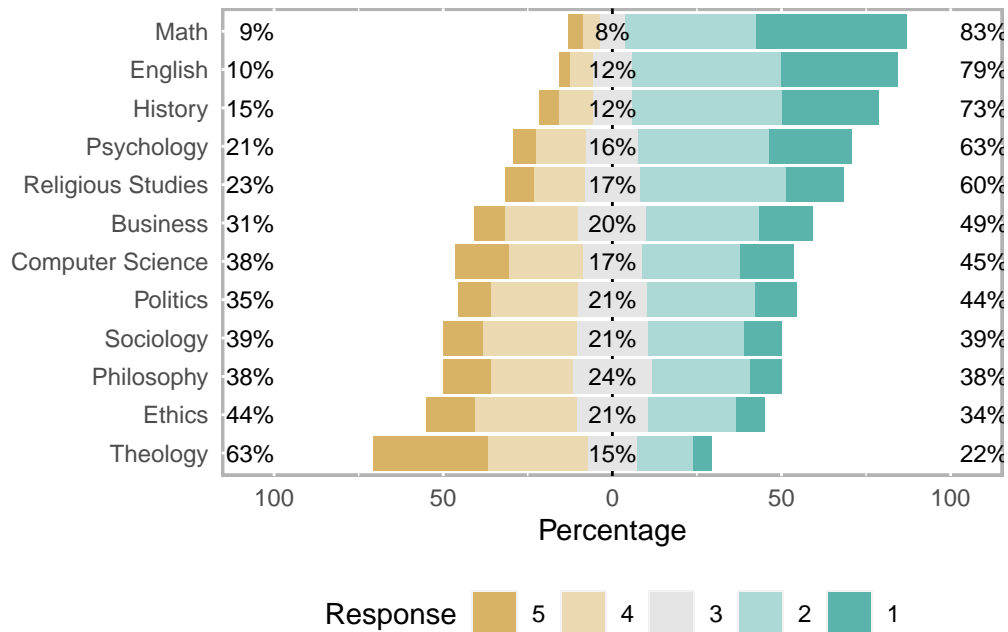


Figure 5: Responses to ‘I have a good understanding of what this subject involves...’

(63% and 22%), almost perfectly for “Theology”. It is important to note that - as we will go on to observe - a lack of understanding did *not* correlate to a lack of interest in studying a subject.

Employability prospects

When responding to the question around employability prospects (shown in Figure 6), the responses were as one might expect with public stereotypes around the “value” of study in the humanities conveyed with a sharp drop and quite optimistic assessments of math and science. As we will explore further below, employability does not seem to be strongly correlated to student subject interest. This can be seen with theology, where a Pearson test shows a value of 0.13, suggesting there is no meaningful correlation between responses on Theology for Q6 and Q7.² This lack of correlation holds true for almost all categories as the matrix shown in Figure 8 of Pearson correlation coefficients for responses to these two questions demonstrates.

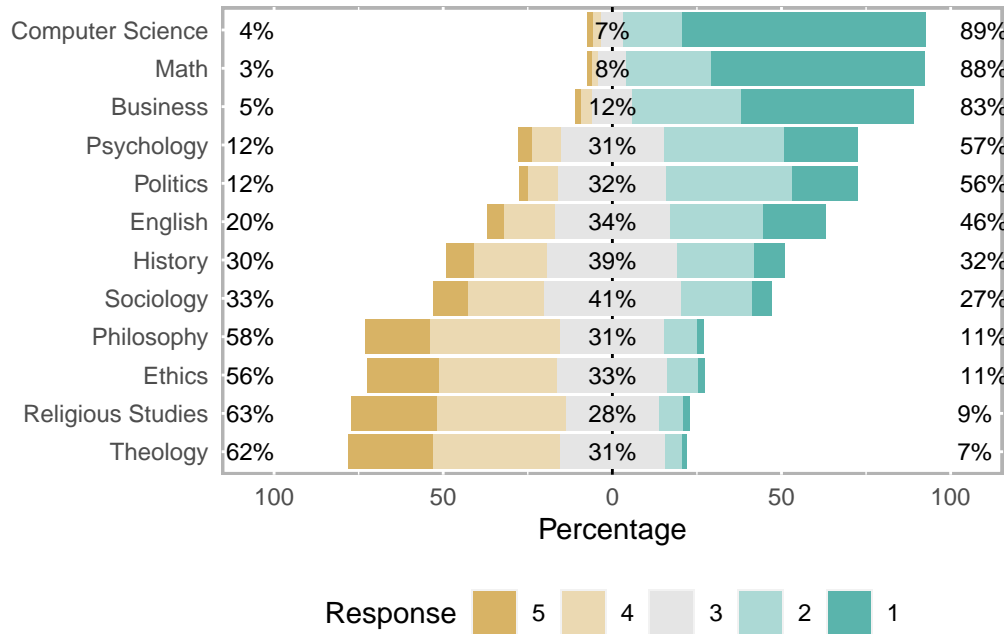


Figure 6: Responses on subject 'employability prospects'

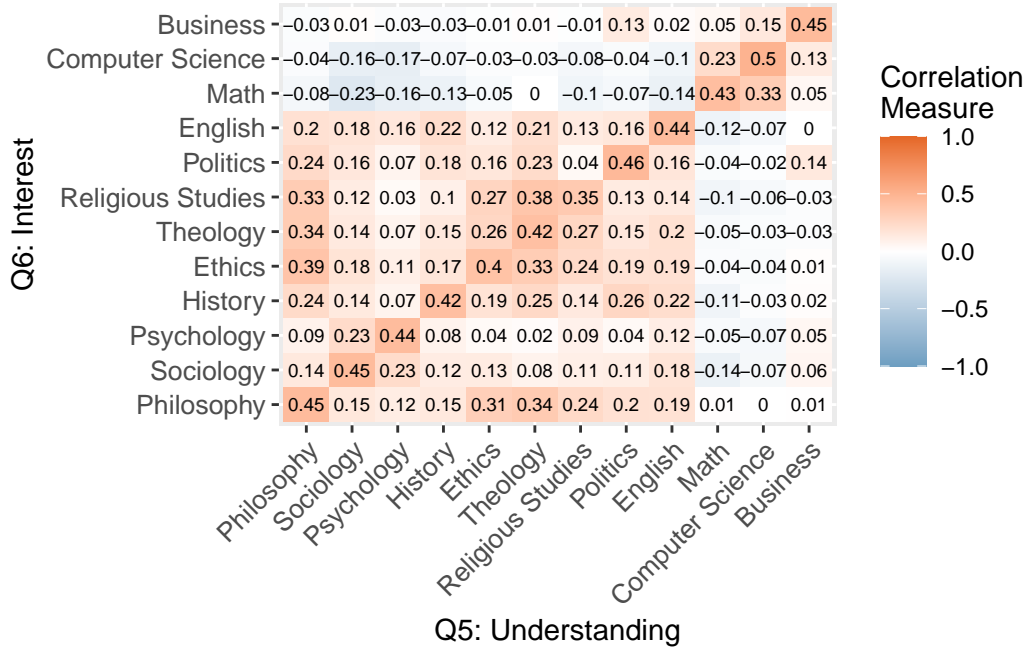


Figure 7: Correlation of Understanding and Interest

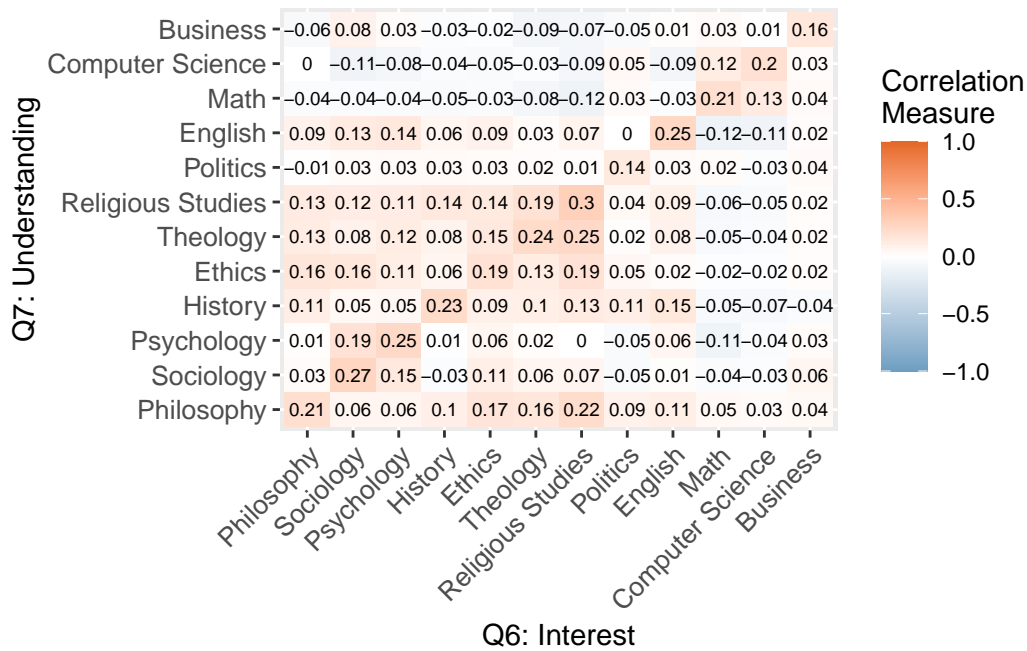


Figure 8: Correlation of Perceived Employability Prospects and Interest

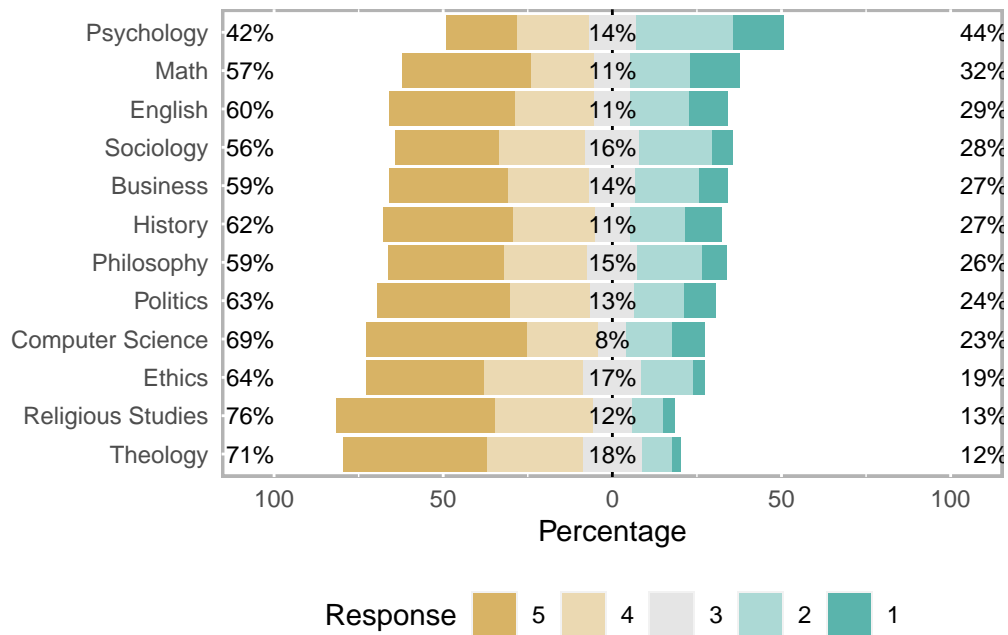


Figure 9: Responses to 'I would be interested in studying this subject at University'

Interest in subjects

When it came to interest in studying the subject at University, shown in Figure 9, responses were moderately correlated to responses around understanding (see Figure 7). As described above, the correlation between interest in subject and perception of employability prospects was even less significant (Figure 8), with the clear winner, computer science, nearly inverting position on the chart from Q7 to Q6.

It is interesting to note that no subject exceeded more than 50% interest among survey responses, indicating that there may not be a single “average student” but instead a variety of interest profiles or clusters among prospective students, given this lack of a majority leader among responses. We do find that three of the top four “understood” subjects remain in the upper half. However, these shift ordering to some extent, with Psychology as a clear leader. Further still, one of the least understood subjects “sociology” shifts from rank 9 to rank 4 for interest. We can generate a correlation matrix to assess whether interest in one subject correlated to others:, shown in Figure 10.

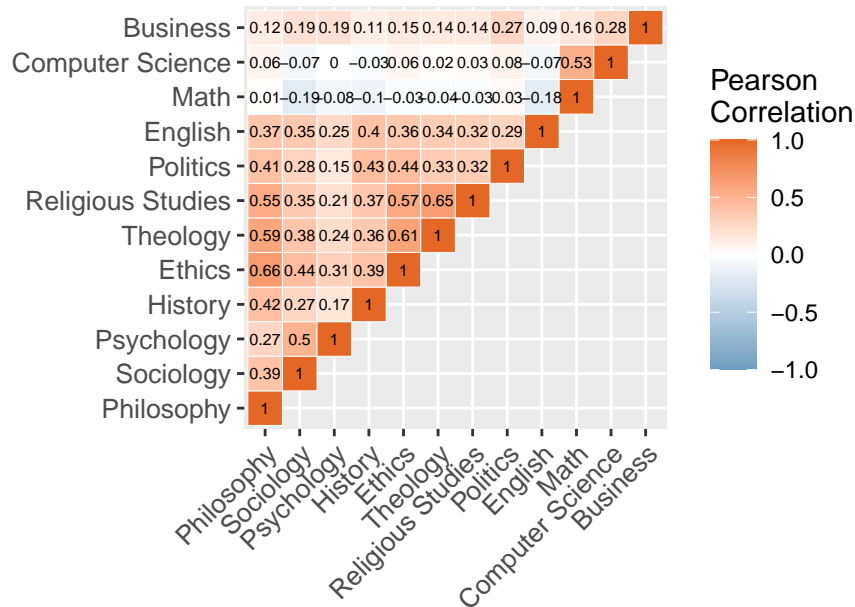


Figure 10: Correlation across different subject interests

In Figure 10 we can see that there are several reasonably strong positive correlations and these are all clustered around TRS, ethics and philosophy with the exception of the strong correlation between interest in computer science and math. For interest in theology, the strongest correlations are with interest in religious studies (0.62) ethics (0.60) and philosophy (0.57). For interest in religious studies, the strongest correlations are with interest in the same

²With a Pearson correlation coefficient, values closer to +/-1 indicate a strong correlation, whereas values closer to 0 indicate a lack of correlation.

subjects, albeit with slightly lower correlations: these are theology (0.62), ethics (0.56) and philosophy (0.54). We will explore the significance of these associations in the next section.

It is interesting to compare the results above data in subsets based on whether a given pupil has or has not taken RE as a GCSE subject. Responses to this question (Q14) were split fairly evenly among our respondents with 493 responding “yes” and 432 “no”. The differences here are more significant with results for pupils who have not taken RS GCSE shown in Figure 11 and results for pupils who have in Figure 12.

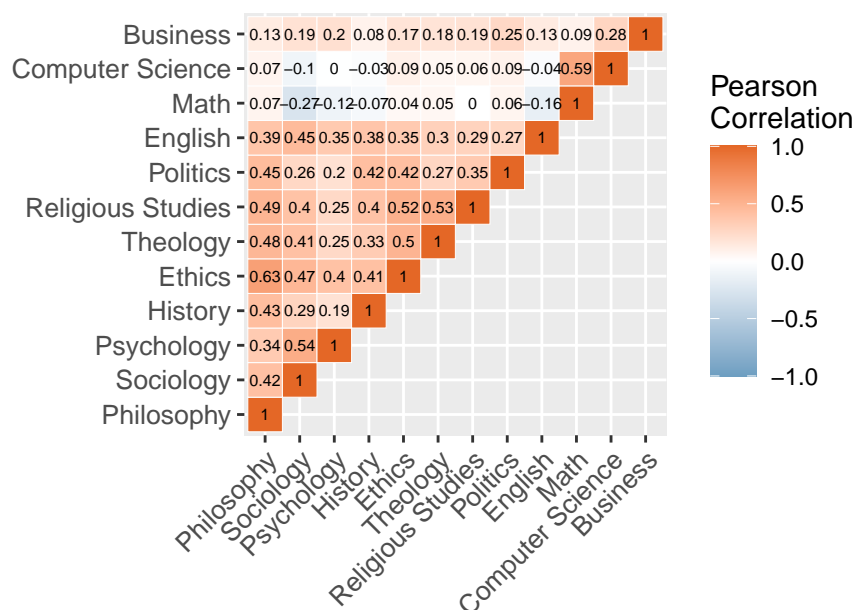


Figure 11: Correlation across different subject interests (no RS GCSE study)

One should be careful not to confuse correlation here with causation, as it is possible that the students who self-select to participate in RE GCSE bring a certain orientation, and not necessarily that their coursework alters their understanding of the subject composition. Nonetheless, we note that while some correlations remain relatively stable across the two cohorts, for example, relating philosophy and ethics, the salience of the relationship between several subjects for this subset of respondents loosens substantially. This includes the relationship between interest in religious studies and theology which drops from 0.66 to 0.53 as well as the correlation between interest in theology and ethics from a statistically significant figure of 0.67 which drops to 0.5. What we can say for certain is that for our respondents who had taken RS GCSE, their interest in these subjects was more strongly correlated.

We can also explore the strength of correlations for students who identify as religious, shown in Figure 13 and those who did not, seen in Figure 14.

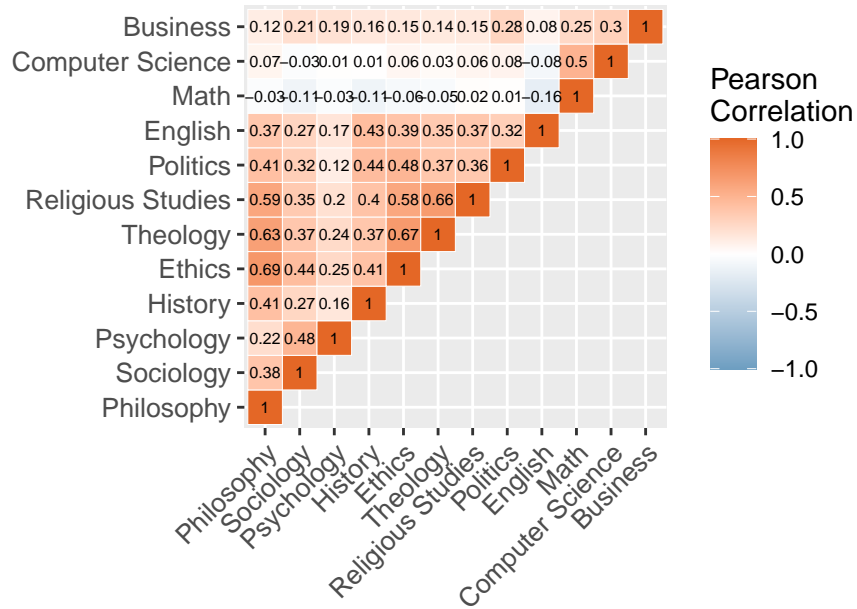


Figure 12: Correlation across different subject interests (yes to RS GCSE study)



Figure 13: Correlation across different subject interests (religious students)

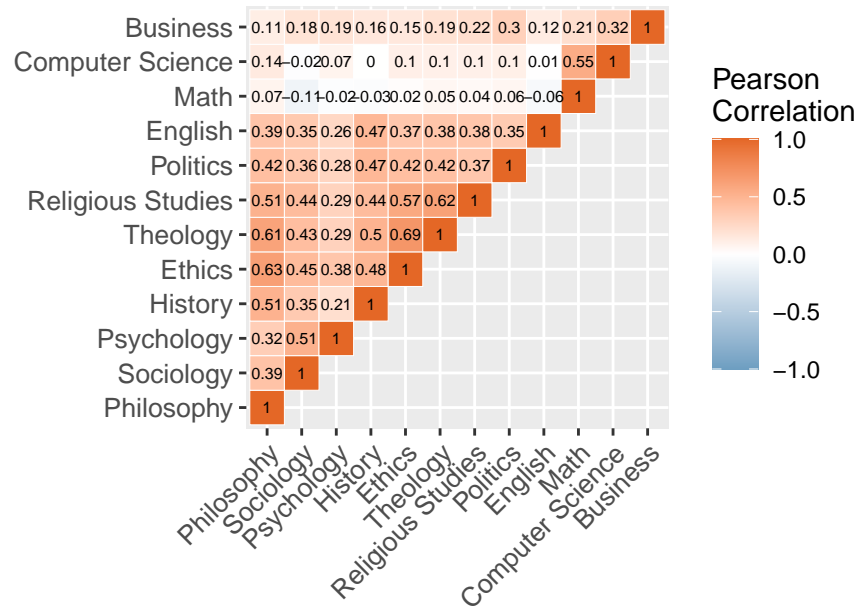


Figure 14: Correlation across different subject interests (non-religious students)

What does study of this subject include?

We also asked respondents to indicate what they think the study of theology and religious studies includes in practice and this data can tease out some possible directions for interpreting correlations in the previous section.

Responses to the question about what “a theology degree would include” were as follows:

- Philosophy - 74%
- Ethics - 70%
- History - 48%
- Literature - 42%
- Textual studies - 40%
- Sociology - 37%
- Psychology - 26%
- Politics - 24%
- Law - 20%
- Arts - 18%
- Archaeology - 18%
- Science - 13%
- Economics - 4%

Responses to what respondents thought a “religious studies degree would include” varied slightly:

- Ethics - 84%
- Philosophy - 81%
- History - 67%
- Textual studies - 47%
- Literature - 43%
- Sociology - 42%
- Politics - 34%
- Law - 26%
- Psychology - 22%
- Arts - 17%
- Archaeology - 16%
- Science - 15%
- Economics - 4%

For respondents, the relationship between philosophy, ethics, theology, and religious studies was highly entangled. And it is clear that the prospective students we surveyed see *both* Religious Studies and Theology as highly interdisciplinary subjects. When students were asked what topics “a theology degree would include” the two most popular choices were “Philosophy” (74%) and “Ethics” (70%). All other options were chosen by less than 50% of respondents. This preference was even more sharply the case for a “religious studies degree” with “Ethics” ticked on 84% of responses and “Philosophy” ticked on 81%. For Religious Studies, “History” was also chosen by 67% of respondents. It is also interesting to note that when respondents were asked to indicate topics that “a philosophy degree would include” the most popular choices were “Ethics” (82%), “Theology” (75%), “Religion” (74%), “Logic” (66%) and “History” (57%). Significant numbers did tick boxes for a range of subjects, but there is an indication in this data that further energy might be invested in demonstrating the disciplinary range of TRS degrees, especially given the lack of connection with sociology even though study of religion is involved in the A-Level syllabus and many TRS programmes have sociology of religion as a central feature of curriculum. However, further research is also warranted as to whether interdisciplinary is a marketable train - do students prefer interdisciplinary degrees and what sort of expectations they bring to joint-honours and interdisciplinary programmes?

Analysis

Situating interest data

Particularly with respect to the TRS focus of this study, it is important to emphasise that though a smaller number responded positively with relation to Theology and Religious Studies than the other proxy subjects included in this study, these proportions for TRS significantly exceed comparative applicant figures reported by UCAS programme enrollments. For

2019, UCAS reports 24,394 applications to Psychology UG programmes, 8,230 to History programmes, 8,285 to Math programmes (JACS group G), 1660 applications to Philosophy UG degree programmes, and 790 to TRS UG degree programmes.³ That 790 is equivalent to just over 3% of psychology admissions, a sharp contrast to the 4:1 ratio shown above. Seen in this way, we may hypothesise that understanding and interest in a subject are not currently mapping in straight-forward ways onto applications for study at University with a variety of “dampening” factors at play.

Comparing Theology and Religious Studies

While some scholars in TRS have drawn a sharp contrast between the two subjects of theology and religious studies, we sought to test this assumption in this study, assessing whether it is in play for prospective students. As shown above, in spite of sharp differences in how well the cohort thought they understood the subjects, they achieve a very similar rank for interest.

Subsetting the responses also reveals some surprising trends in the data, contradicting an expectation that the results might be dichotomous. Just under 5% of responses were asymmetrical in marking interest in theology and religious studies with 43 respondents marking Agree or Strongly Agree in one column and Disagree or Strongly Disagree in the other. In this case, only around 21% (25 of 116 total) of positive responses to this question on “Religious Studies” as a subject had a dichotomous, or confidently negative sentiment with regard to studying “Theology”. Similarly, around 22% (24 total of 107) of positive responses to this question on “Theology” had a confidently negative response with regard to “Religious Studies”.

However, in all cases where a respondent marked that they “Strongly Agree” with regard to the study of theology, they had a positive or ambiguous (“Neither/Nor” or “Prefer not to answer”) response to interest in Religious Studies. The opposite (“Strongly Agree” on “Religious Studies” and a negative sentiment towards “Theology”) was only the case for less than 1% (7) responses out of a total of nearly 1000. We take this to indicate that sentiments towards theology and religious studies in this sample do not dichotomise in straight-forward ways. Many respondents had overlapping, if different, interest in both. We would recommend further qualitative research to develop some more nuanced and in-depth tests for the perceptions of prospective University students towards these two themes alongside others such as “spirituality” or specific religious traditions (e.g. Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, etc.).

³Figures taken from <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2020>. Data for history is for “History by Period” excluding “History by Area” and “History by Topic”. JACS codes can be found here: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/jacs/jacs3-detailed>.

Do A-Levels matter?

Given the differences in correlations shown above based on a pupil’s participation in GCSE study, we sought to understand whether participation in A-Levels had a correlation with interest in TRS study. This was a small sample, only 7% of students who took the survey indicated “Yes” to the question “Are you currently studying A level Religious Studies, or intending to?” But there was some sense of correlation

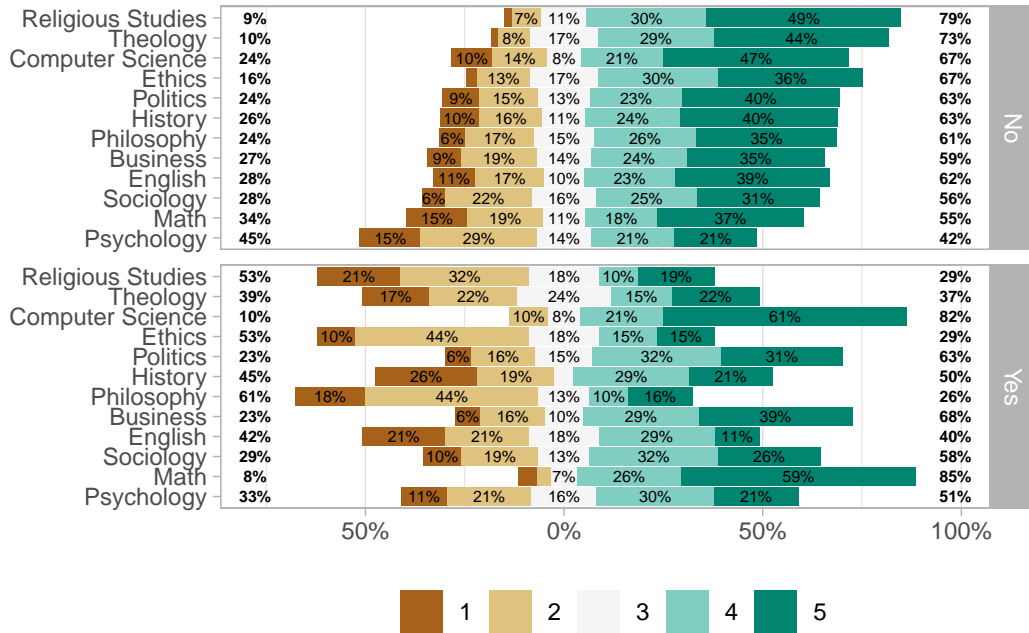


Figure 15: Responses to ‘I would be interested in studying this subject at University’ (subset using A-Levels)

We can see how, for this subset, interest in religious studies and theology both increase substantially, particularly for the former of the two. Compare this to the (much larger) cohort in our study who reported they had not participated in RS A-Levels in the chart above.

Does religion or ethnicity matter?

Positive sentiments also did not correlate in significant ways to participation in an organised religion. As shown in Figure 17, when data was filtered based on student participation in organised religion (students who marked “Agnostic”, “Atheist”, “Spiritual but not religious” or “No Religion” were marked non-religious), the proportion of students who indicated participation/intention to participate in A-Level RS did not change, nor was there a significant overall

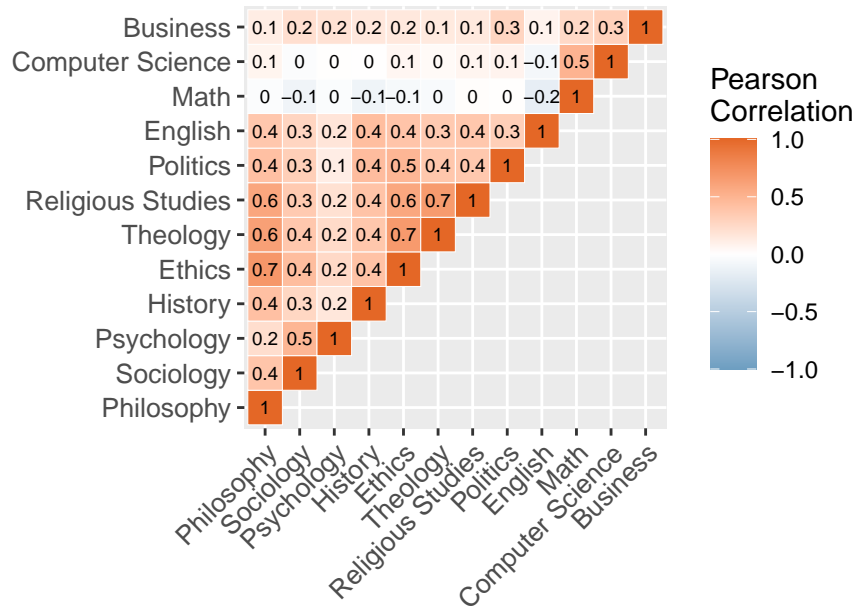


Figure 16: Responses to ‘I would be interested in studying this subject at University’

change to the proportion of students who marked “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” to the statement “I would be interested in studying this subject at University” for theology or religious studies.

Negative responses for “theology” do not correlate in easily perceptible ways to religious identity. Prospective students who marked “Atheist” (68%) and “No religion” (77%) were likely to indicate disagreement, but so were Hindu (71%), Muslim (65%) and Pagan (71%) students. Lower, but still significant Disagree/Strongly Disagree responses were also the case for “Spiritual but not religious” (53%), “Christian” (55%) and “Agnostic” (55%) students.

There were also modest differences when responses were divided into subsets based on ethnicity, as shown in Figure 18. Here the results are ambiguous. Overall positive sentiment shifted upwards for religious studies for white students and remained steady for both cohorts on theology. The “strongly agree” responses follow a different pattern, however, shifting down for religious studies and up for theology for non-white respondents.

Some observations regarding mystique

It was particularly interesting to note that there is positive interest in studying Theology in spite of the lack of understanding of what that study involves. Further research would be necessary to judge the meaning of this discovery, e.g. whether interest numbers would be increased, unaffected or lessened if the level of “unknowing” or conversely the “mystique” of

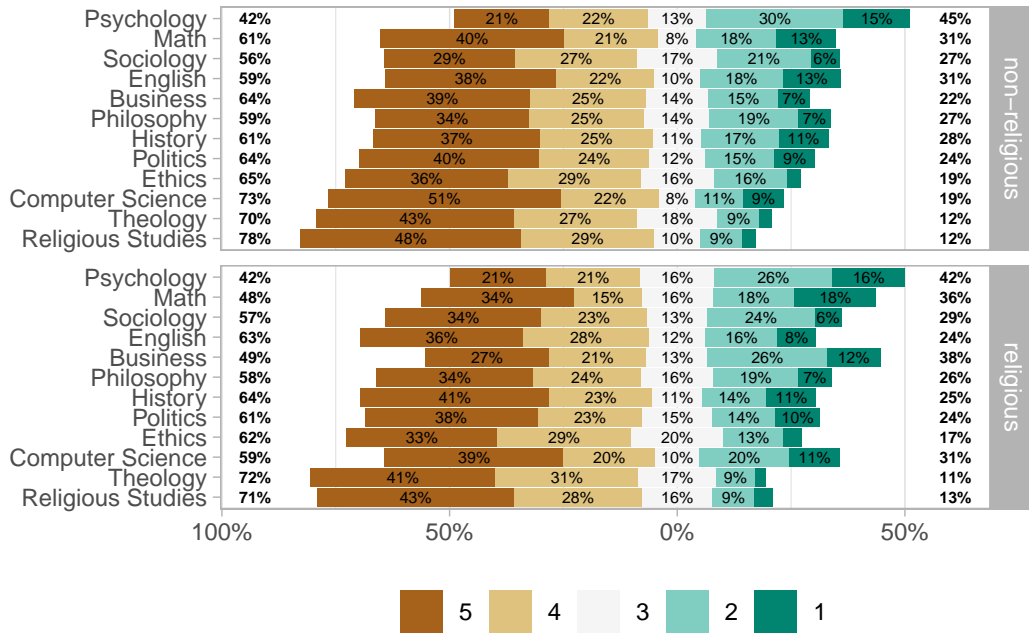


Figure 17: Responses to 'I would be interested in studying this subject at University' (subset using religion)

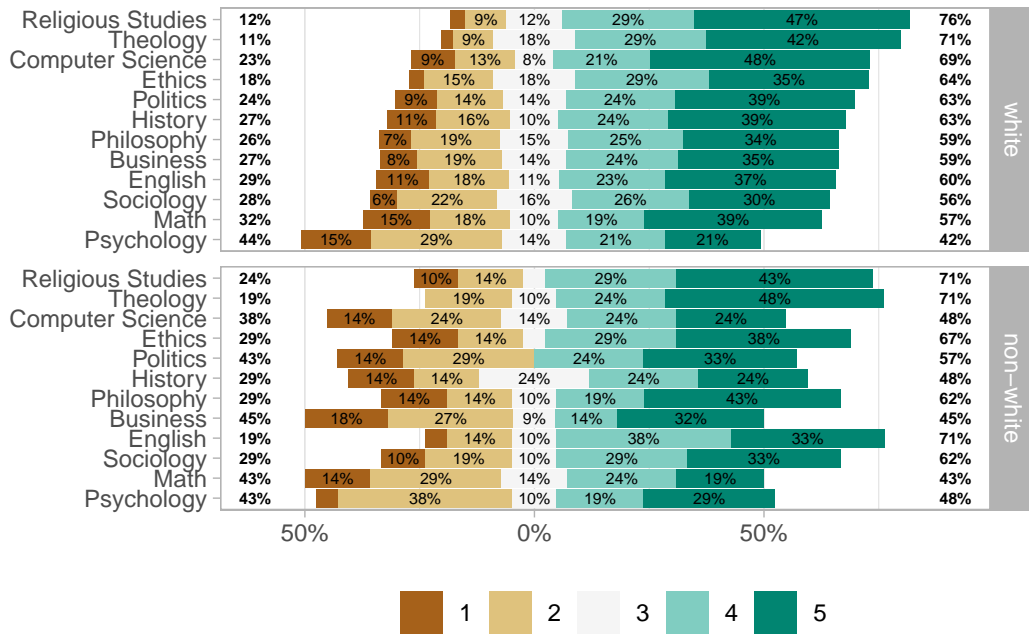


Figure 18: Responses to 'I would be interested in studying this subject at University' (subset by white / non-white ethnicity)

the subject were reduced. For the sake of this study, we can explore the data to a certain extent in an attempt to ascertain whether the “mystique” factor is significant.

If we look at the responses to Q6 around interest in studying the subject, we find that the mean response by respondents who indicated that they did not understand what the subject involved was 3.2. Bearing in mind that higher response codes in this dataset indicated a more negative response (“strongly disagree” was coded as 5 whereas “strongly agree” was coded as 1), we find that the sentiment shifts towards the negative for higher levels of perceived understanding, with a mean interest value of 3.93 for neutral responses on understanding and a mean interest value of 4.28 for low levels of understanding. We use the term “mystique effect” to refer to this pattern where the more a student thinks they understand the subject, the less interested they are in studying it. The same pattern holds true for interest in religious studies. We believe that this effect should be observed with some caution, given that the correlations between understanding and interest are low for nearly all except for some outlier categories.

Future research

This analysis reveals some baseline challenges which would be appropriate for future research. It is clear that there is a quite significant positive gap between enrollments in TRS programmes in British Universities and prospective student interest, and that students are clearly interested in *some* kind of TRS study, whether they access it or not. In that gap, it would be helpful to ascertain what kinds of features of study might draw in those interested-but-not-enrolled pupils, and whether this might need to be in the form of para-programe learning, such as a minor degree option, or if there is some other factor which dampens conversion of this interest into matriculation.

As noted above, further research is also warranted with regards to prospective student sentiments towards interdisciplinarity. Assuming there is some positive indication in that direction, it would be important to ascertain where students are getting their ideas about what is involved in TRS study, especially given the apparent lack of awareness about the kinds of multidisciplinary opportunities which are available. It would also be useful to know whether there are different kinds of clusters (historical, anthropological, textual, etc.) and where these sentiments come from (e.g. parents, alumni, personal experience, teacher, etc.). The core research question here relates to how and whether TRS programmes should emphasise interdisciplinary learning as a feature (especially the relation to “ethics”) which is particularly salient given the shift in RE towards “worldviews”). Further research could also develop and trial ways of explaining what the subjects are about to prospective students. In practice this would probably take the form of developing key USP style slogans and A/B testing these messages to see how prospective students respond.

This research was limited to just the terms “theology” and “religious studies” but there is good reason to believe that students may find appeal in other key terms, such as “spirituality”. It would be interesting to learn how different kinds of prospective students react to religion

specific terms in programme marketing, e.g. Sikhism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc. And finally, it would be useful to explore other adjacent interdisciplinary frames and unpack the salience of the term “ethics,” which remarkably many of our respondents associated more clearly with TRS than study in philosophy.