Dear Selection Committee,

For my policy brief, entitled “Policy Brief: Persecution of the Veil Justified by Laïcité”, was my first attempt at writing a policy brief for my Religion Capstone: Religion in the Public Sphere. The integral objective of the assignment was to investigate and present a controversial policy that exemplifies the core concepts of the relationship between religion, governance, and public policy. It was an undertaking that challenged my research and writing ability, French-Second-Language skills, and numerical literacy beyond anything I ever knew I had before. The extent of my research was focused on the banning of religiously ostentatious symbols, specifically the hijab, from public schools in France.

I initially took a non-scholarly path to inform me on the controversy in France. I was hoping to educate myself on the hijab debate in France to write a policy brief about the controversial issue. Although I quickly found a lot of news articles through a simple keyword search of “(hijab OR headscarf) AND ban AND France”, I did not expect to hit my first challenge so early in the form of a language barrier. Most news articles written in English were from news agencies outside of France that offered one sided accounts of the situation, however the news articles written in French offered a more vested interest in the issue. Recalling my French language skills and Google Translate to get me by French news articles on the issue I realized that the “voile” (or veil) was the technical term used in policy reports and journal articles. This required me to conduct research in Canada’s second language and on an entirely different country.

Armed with a list of French keywords (laïcité, femmes, voile, and interdire, ostentatoire) I began to search for French news articles. After translating the news articles, I found that the issue affects school girls the most. I began to develop and narrow the scope of my policy brief on school girls in France and how the ban not only discriminates their right to religious freedom but also impedes their right to education. This was entirely unfamiliar territory for me as scholar of religion, because I have never taken a human rights approach to research before. I relied heavily on the UofT library research guides on United Nations publications which lead me to the Official Document System (ODS) where I found the “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights” and “RESOLUTION 32/22: THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION” documents signed by nations, including France. Also, the Critical Information Policy Studies research guide showed me specific policy databases, such as PAIS International that provided me with articles, government documents, grey literature, research & conference reports, publications of international agencies to support my argument. By performing a very specific search for “(veil* AND ban*) AND loc(France)” I uncovered an opinion piece, Uncovering Women’s Rights: The Burqa Ban and The Fight for Equality in France, that would lead me to government reports, NGO documents, and statistics.

As I began my scholarly approach to researching the topic I was quickly lost in a sea of legal language and case studies of European Union Court rulings, United Nations rulings, policy reviews, and documents produced by the government of France that were incredibly valuable and added clarity to the research. The articles I found informed me on the concept of laïcité that justified the passing of Bill no. 1378 into Law 2004-228 and the Stasi report that informed the French government on the issue of the veil in school. Although, journal articles mentioned the Stasi report it was very difficult to find the actual document online from the actual government source. There
were a lot of versions of the document floating around online, however I could not trust their authenticity unless it came from a government website. It was not until I saw in the footnotes of "From Law to Narratives Unveiling Contemporary French Secularism", a working paper, that I found the url of the report. However, simply copying and pasting the url into the web browser did not work, because the citation was incorrectly written. I had to decipher the actual name of the report, in French, from the url. I then used the *La Documentation française* government database to find the actual report that started Bill no. 1378. I developed a skill for finding and navigating the government of France’s databases for legal texts, which includes *La Documentation française, Assemblée nationale, Légifrance*, and *Ministère de l'Éducation nationale*. These documents added credibility to quality to my policy brief by referencing the documents published by government of France.

My regular meetings with Prof. Laura Bugg was an important part of my development as a policy brief writer. She helped me discover a critical gap in my knowledge and training as a scholar of religion, numerical literacy. Before writing this policy brief, I had always supported my research papers and essays on qualitative data—often neglecting quantitative analysis. By advising me to find statistics on the issue (e.g. how many girls affected and how many families were affected) Prof. Laura Bugg challenged my research ability and added quantitative analysis to my research toolbox.

The next challenge was finding statistics to back up my policy recommendations with numerical data. Due to the enforcement of laïcité by the French government there were no government statistics on how many Muslim people there are in France, or how many students were affected by the veil ban from public schools. I had to rely on NGO reports that conducted their own survey for public knowledge. Although, the government of France does not conduct surveys on religious affiliation I found the Pew Research Center had a monumental amount of statistics and future projects on the number of Muslim people in France. The statistical analysis provided another dimension from which I was able to further support my policy recommendations.

The research process I undertook thoroughly developed my confidence as policy brief writer. I became familiar with international law, legal language, French language, and numerical literacy that has enriched my future research methodology. I also gained practical on how to cite a variety of sources. This research project has inspired me to combine my passion for religion with human rights and to seek a fulfilling career in public policy, championing for the rights of people in religious conflict.