

THE BRADLEY REVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Submission from the Australian College of Theology Ltd

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The Australian College of Theology (ACTh) welcomes the opportunity to place the concerns and interests of the College before the Review Panel. In the present environment the College, its affiliated institutions, and the students who undertake courses of study in the College, face various difficulties which we hope the present Review will be able to address.

The College is a major provider of theological education in Australia within the largely private, church-sponsored theological education sector in Australia. It was established in 1891 by a Determination of the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia in order to provide for the “systematic study of divinity” especially among the clergy and ordination candidates. The College maintains this role. Almost half of its students are seeking to be trained for full-time Christian ministry. The College also provides ongoing education to a large number of students seeking to deepen their understanding of faith and life, and contribute to the life of their church and wider community in a variety of ways, in a paid or voluntary capacity.

Since its establishment, the ACTh has remained a body of the Synod. The legislation under which the College is currently constituted is the Australian College of Theology Canon 2007.

The College’s original awards were four in number—the Associate in Theology (ThA), the Licentiate in Theology (ThL), the Scholar in Theology (ThSchol) and the Fellow of the College (ThSoc). All were conferred by successful examination only. The ThSoc has long been superseded by the research degree of Doctor of Theology (ThD).

The current suite of accredited higher education courses has grown from the Bachelor of Theology (BTh) degree, first accredited by the then New South Wales Higher Education Board in 1975, and the research degree of Master of Theology (MTh) in 1976. The College’s first coursework masters degree was accredited in 1988. A Doctor of Ministry (DMin), a doctorate modelled on Australian university professional doctorates and the North American Doctor of Ministry degree, was added to the College’s suite of accredited courses in 1998. The College was one of the first non university providers to offer an accredited bachelors degree and a research doctorate.

The courses of the College are accredited by the Director-General of the NSW Department of Education and Training under the *Higher Education Act 2001* (NSW). These courses are mutually recognised by all the other States under the terms of a 2006 agreement of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) to recognise higher education courses accredited in the provider’s host State, which in the College’s case is New South Wales.

The College now operates as a national, ecumenical consortium of affiliated independent institutions, each with their own church and para-church stakeholders. This arrangement originated in 1974 when several long-established institutions sought approval from the College’s governing body to deliver the newly proposed BTh degree. From these beginnings there are now 20 mostly non-Anglican theological and Bible colleges situated in each mainland State that have been approved to deliver the accredited courses of the College on its behalf. These 20 institutions currently enrol just over 1,200 equivalent full-time students

(including 90 international students), or 1,900 individual students and research candidates, in the degrees of the College.

The number of graduates since the foundation of the College numbers is close to 14,000. One-third of these have graduated in the last decade. There have been 106 graduates of the MTh and 41 of the ThD. The College has a developing research profile.

There is a high value placed on collaboration and cooperation across the consortium. Policy and curriculum are centrally determined. Admission of research candidates and outcome of examinations of these are determined by a committee of the College's academic board.

The College is registered as an Australian Higher Education Provider (HEP) under the Higher Education Support Act (2003) for five years from 1 May 2005.

The College underwent a quality audit conducted by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) in November 2006, the first non self-accrediting provider to do so. The Audit Report of the College is publicly accessible on the AUQA website. The AUQA Audit Progress Report has been posted on the home page of the College's website.

The theological education sector makes a substantial contribution to higher education in Australia and Australian society, but remains largely under-recognised by government bodies and programs. The ACTh, like a number of its peers in the non self-accrediting higher education sector, is finding the current state-based accreditation environment increasingly onerous and costly, designed as it is to the circumstances of commercial operations rather than the not-for-profit sector. This is particularly so in the case of the ACTh which, as a consortium, operates across different jurisdictions and must face multiple costs of registration and authorisation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In responding to the Review the Australian College of Theology makes the following recommendations:

- ***Student support:*** To further access to higher education FEE-HELP arrangements should be fully maintained, or be replaced by a higher education learning entitlement system as means of funding for Australian citizens, or Commonwealth supported places be expanded to the accredited courses of the private sector.
- ***Research funding:*** Access to research training funding, including Australian Postgraduate Awards, the Research Training Scheme and the Institutional Grants Scheme, should be made available to the non self-accrediting sector on the basis of a demonstrated and benchmarked capacity in research training.
- ***Learning and Teaching funding:*** Access to Australian Learning and Teaching Council learning and teaching awards and funding should be made available to the non self-accrediting sector on the same present competitive basis as currently in the university sector.
- ***Australian Research Council:*** Access to funding should be available to the non self-accrediting sector on the same present competitive basis as currently in the university sector.

- ***Endeavour Scholarships:*** Scholarships for overseas students pursuing Higher Degrees by Research should be extended to the non self-accrediting sector and that these scholarships include a Living Allowance on the same terms as those provided for students holding Australian Postgraduate Awards.
- ***Accreditation:*** In order to reduce the overall costs of mounting and maintaining higher education programs, accreditation and registration processes should be nationally coordinated and/or centralised, with cost structures that take into account the size of institutions and capacity to pay

DIVERSE, HIGH PERFORMING INSTITUTIONS WITH A GLOBAL FOCUS

Theology has a long history of involvement in higher education, the creation of new knowledge, and the fostering of independent learning and the dissemination of research. Indeed the foundation of modern universities can be traced to institutions established in the Middle Ages primarily to teach theology, such as the universities of Paris, Bologna, Leuven, Oxford, and Cambridge. These universities, together with their prestigious, more recent American counterparts such as Harvard and Yale, continue to teach theology in the present era. However, it is only in recent times that the Australian university sector has begun to reflect this long tradition when some universities (Charles Sturt, Flinders, and Murdoch Universities) have developed courses in theology in conjunction with previously established theological colleges. The Australian Catholic University has had a School of Theology since its establishment in the mid 1990s, as has the University of Notre Dame (a Table B provider). Newcastle University is currently establishing a School of Theology. Courses in theology offered by these universities are delivered by people who profess the Christian faith.

The theological education sector has a strong global and regional focus. A number of the academic staff members teaching at affiliated institutions of the ACTh have trained overseas and possess doctoral qualifications from prestigious institutions. Many are part of international academic networks of theologians and church communities.

The College contributes to the training of ministers and theological college lecturers in the Australasian region and in the continuing education of professionals in a wide range of fields. It attracts overseas students both at undergraduate and post-graduate levels. Graduates have performed well at overseas institutions in research programs. A number of ACTh academic staff members also serve on international church and mission committees and some have attained high office in their churches.

The College also caters for a significant number of international students, particularly from the Asia-Pacific region and East Africa. These students have typically completed their initial training in theology in their home contexts, and come to Australia for post-graduate study. They are often sponsored by their local church communities, often at great cost, and return to their countries of origin to provide leadership in their church and wider communities, equipping these churches to meet their ministerial requirements in the local culture and context. Affiliated institutions of the ACTh have been responsive to particular and personal educational needs of these students, providing them with special support for their learning

and cultural adjustment. **This has been achieved without any funding from government sources.**

Since the early 1990s theological students who meet the eligibility requirements have had access to Austudy. The absence of rent assistance from Austudy, however, in comparison to Youth Allowance and Newstart, disadvantages students, especially those whose colleges require them to study in a residential environment. The advent of FEE-HELP funding from 2005 has enabled students to have direct access to loans to assist in the payment of fees, which until that time were paid in full upfront. The FEE-HELP scheme has facilitated access to theological education, offered welcome financial assistance to the sector, and also brought it into the open as a result of the public reporting of enrolments.

Theological students have made great use of the income-contingent FEE-HELP scheme. The College can report that 63% of its students are currently taking a FEE-HELP loan for all or part of their studies. During 2008 ACTh students are receiving close to \$6 million in FEE-HELP loans.

The ACTh is aware that there has been some public criticism of the theology sector in relation to FEE-HELP, since students employed by churches may never achieve the minimum taxable income that requires them to begin repaying their FEE-HELP loans. Generally speaking ACTh graduates who are authorised as clergy or ministers receive benefits in relation to fringe benefits tax and the like in recognition of the benefit gained by society overall through the services provided by churches to building social capital, and the provision of education, health and welfare services to the community. In addition, clergy stipends are minimal in comparison to other professions. Analysis of the Graduate Careers Australia survey of our 2007 graduates discloses that they receive an average annual salary of \$38,000. However, as noted above, almost half of our graduates are training for full-time ministry. The average annual salary of such graduates is approximately \$35,000.

Meanwhile students undertaking theological programs at universities listed on Table A providers (Australian Catholic University, Charles Sturt University, Flinders University and Murdoch University) have access to Commonwealth Supported Places.

In order to ensure the current contribution of theology and to address equity issues whereby some students can access Commonwealth Supported Places if they are enrolled at those providers listed in Table A while others cannot, the ACTh therefore recommends with respect to student support in order to provide further access to higher education that:

- FEE-HELP arrangements should be fully maintained, or
- be replaced by a higher education learning entitlement system as a means of funding for Australian citizens, or
- Commonwealth supported places be expanded to the accredited courses of the private sector.

There are also important questions of equity in relation to research funding. Currently the Melbourne College of Divinity (MCD)—a provider listed on Table B of the HESA 2003 by virtue of its 1910 Victorian Act—has (competitive) access to Endeavour Scholarships, Australian Postgraduate Awards, the Research Training Scheme and the Institutional Grants Scheme. Other major theological providers, such as the ACTh, that are not listed on Table A or B do not have such access, although their research standards are comparable to those of the MCD. The ACTh recommends as a matter of urgency that:

- access to research training funding, including Australian Postgraduate Awards, the Research Training Scheme and the Institutional Grants Scheme, should be made available to the non self-accrediting sector on the basis of a demonstrated and benchmarked capacity in research training.

Theological colleges, including the ACTh, that are not associated with universities are also precluded from other forms of higher education funding such as Australian Research Council grants and Australian Learning and Teaching Council grants and awards. Currently the non self-accrediting higher education sector is expected to meet all the requirements of research and learning and teaching excellence aspired to within the public sector, but is unable to access crucial funding that would undoubtedly contribute to making this possible. In addition, while it is reported that Endeavour Scholarships have assisted some overseas theological students to take their doctorate in Australia, the ACTh notes that the addition of a Living Allowance for such students has placed significant burdens on their sponsors, especially where Australian costs of living are considerably higher than in their countries of origin.

The ACTh therefore recommends that

- access to Australian Learning and Teaching Council learning and teaching awards and funding should be made available to the non self-accrediting sector on the same present competitive basis as currently in the university sector.
- access to Australian Research Council funding should be available to the non self-accrediting sector on the same present competitive basis as currently in the university sector.
- Endeavour Scholarships for overseas students pursuing Higher Degrees by Research should be extended to the non self-accrediting sector and that these scholarships include a Living Allowance on the same terms as those provided for students holding Australian Postgraduate Awards.

PRODUCTIVITY AND PARTICIPATION

The ACTh has been responsive to the challenges facing the churches in developing accredited programs which provide professional education for ministers and others, not only in courses in theology but also in theological related disciplines such as religious education and chaplaincy.

At a time when Australian higher education is beginning to take seriously the issue of community engagement, theological colleges can point to a long history of providing graduates who make a substantial contribution to the building up of the social capital of the Australian community. Indeed, theological students do so while still in the midst of theological study by means of services offered at weekends in local church, neighbourhood and welfare contexts. Theological graduates contribute to both private and public education, health and welfare sectors, not least through church-based agencies. These activities enhance the overall social capital of the society and thus contribute to national well-being.

The study of theology also can contribute to social harmony and mutual understanding between different cultural groups in our multi-cultural, multi-faith society. The College

endorses the view expressed in the 2007 UK report on Theology and Religious Studies (TRS):

The nature of TRS means that studying the subject may have a profound impact on the student's life and outlook. The experience of studying this subject may contribute to a student's personal development, transforming horizons by engaging with cultures and societies other than their own, whether ancient or modern. It may foster a lifelong quest for wisdom, respect for one's own integrity and that of others, self-examination in terms of the beliefs and values adopted for one's own life, a better understanding of its role in geo-political conflict and, not least, the challenging of prejudices. The multidisciplinary nature of much TRS also means that students have breadth of vision and intellectual flexibility.¹

The greatest impediment to the responsiveness of the non self-accrediting theological education sector to meeting the needs of the churches and wider society, however, has been the increasingly bureaucratic demands placed on the sector by state accrediting agencies and CRICOS regulators at the state level. These demands impede the processes of course development, review and implementation, and significantly increase their costliness. This is particularly the case where consortia like the ACTh operate in multiple jurisdictions across state boundaries. This has led to experiences of inconsistent requirements and consequent inequities. We fully endorse the move towards the establishment of a national accreditation agency, and strongly support the development of greater consistency and coordination in course accreditation and provider registration, CRICOS registration, authorisation to conduct and annual reporting processes, with cost structures which take into account the size of providers and their capacity to pay.

The ACTh therefore recommends with respect to accreditation and registration that:

- in order to reduce the overall costs of mounting and maintaining higher education programs, accreditation and registration processes should be nationally coordinated and/or centralised, with cost structures that take into account the size of institutions and capacity to pay.

SOCIAL INCLUSION THROUGH ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY

The theological sector encourages greater social inclusion in higher education. The ACTh has always been responsive to providing lifelong learning so as to meet the challenge of new learning, ongoing professional education and an ageing population. The average age of students enrolled in the courses of the ACTh is 36. Our students bring considerable life-experience, high expectations and lively engagement and commitment to their learning. Moreover, they are attracted to theological study due to the opportunities presented to explore questions relevant to their life and work.

A high proportion of theological students enrolled with the ACTh hold a previous tertiary qualification, and come to study theology through a personal commitment to life-long learning. In addition, the ACTh can point to a much higher percentage of mature age entry students with little, if any, formal education since leaving school. The smaller class sizes and community-based nature of the institutional affiliates of the College assists these new students to adapt to the demands of higher education and so develop confidence and skills. Other students, including significant numbers of women preparing to re-enter the workforce after raising a family, enrol in courses in theology in search of a "second career" with a view

¹ "Theology and Religious Studies" (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education [UK], 2007), p. 4.

to service in the church and wider community welfare and teaching sectors. Some proceed to higher research degrees. The research skills developed are easily transferable into other areas of social and academic research.

Data on 2008 ACTh student profile

- The average ACT coursework student age is 36; for research students it is 45.
- As regard gender mix, 60% are male, 40% are female.
- A majority of students (68%) enrol with a prior tertiary qualification
- Those intending professional ministry constitute 46% of the student body

Many ethnic communities with strong church commitments find in theological colleges a point of entry into higher education in the Australian context. These include students with permanent humanitarian visa holders and permanent residents who have migrated.

Data on 2008 ACTh country of origin

Asia	44	Pacific	7	Other	26
Thailand	1	New Zealand	5	UK, nfd	2
Viet Nam	1	Solomon Islands	1	England	2
Indonesia	2	Vanuatu	1	Scotland	1
Malaysia	8			Austria	1
Philippines	1			Germany	3
Singapore	4			Switzerland	3
China	4			Sweden	1
Hong Kong	2			Canada	2
Taiwan	2			USA	3
Japan	2			Brazil	1
North Korea	1			Ghana	1
South Korea	13			Nigeria	2
India	2			Kenya	1
Sri Lanka	1			Malawi	1
				Mauritius	1
				Tanzania	1

In these various ways, the ACTh and the theological educations sector generally contributes significantly to the upgrading of the generic skills of their students, both domestic and international. Students emerge with new graduate attributes which contribute to their life opportunities and employability.

ENHANCED QUALITY AND HIGH STANDARDS

The theological sector is particularly sensitive to the issue of standards in higher education. All non self-accrediting theological institutions providing higher education courses are subject to regular and rigorous re-accreditation processes by state government accrediting agencies. These processes review the qualifications of teaching staff, resourcing and the standards of all programs offered. As a significant number of staff of the ACTh have qualifications from major overseas institutions, there is also a concern to keep standards at an appropriate international level, not least for the purposes of recognition for students transferring to overseas colleges for their research training.

All HEPs are required to be subject to quality audits by AUQA or to other bodies listed in the guidelines of the HESA 2003. The ACTh was audited in November 2006 and received significant commendations.

The ACTh engages in various moderation and external benchmarking procedures with other colleges and the university sector to ensure proper academic standards are being met. The ACTh uses external examiners for research theses (doctoral, masters and honours), including at least one overseas examiner for each thesis submitted. There is wide consultation across the sector in curriculum development quality assurance processes.

The Committee of Deans of Theology and University Departments facilitates the exchange of a wide range of data and assists in promoting quality education across the sector. As a founding member of the Committee of Deans, the Dean of the ACTh is actively participating in a Carrick Institute (now the Australian Learning and Teaching Council [ALTC]) Discipline-based Initiative project that is being funded by a \$100K grant from the ALTC to undertake a scoping exercise to uncover the “depth, reach and utility” of theological education in Australia. This research will be completed by February 2009. It will facilitate future benchmarking and moderation processes across the sector.

Since 2006 the College has participated in the graduate surveys conducted by Graduate Careers Australia. Data gathered over the last three years shows that 85-90% of each of our graduate cohorts is highly satisfied with their experience of learning and teaching.² Moreover when benchmarked with CEQ data from self-accrediting institutions our graduates report similar or elevated levels of satisfaction.

The non self-accrediting theological education sector, including the ACTh, has demonstrated through both the rigour of the accreditation and registration processes to which it submits and also its attention to processes that are designed to enhance continuous quality improvement, that the sector warrants parity of esteem with self-accrediting providers and access to funding arrangements and other benefits the self-accrediting sector currently enjoys.

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² 85-80% of ACTh graduates report that they either Strongly Agree or Agree with the statement that “overall they were satisfied with the quality of this course”.