

Graduation Address  
School of Christian Studies  
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I would like to thank Dr Grant Maple for his invitation not only to attend the presentation of awards tonight but also to give the address, which I have titled “The place of the ACT in theological education”.

I want to look briefly at our history, consider developments in higher education policy, provide an account of some recent ACT achievements and opportunities that lie before us.

1. Our history.

The College was established in 1891 by the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia to provide theological education for clergy and lay people and an academic preparation for ministry for those seeking ordination that would parallel in terms of rigour, curriculum and learning outcomes what was available in England.

For most of its history the ACT has been an examining body. There was a central curriculum, a set of units, each with a bibliography, and a body of regulations. Students from all over the country sat for the exams each November. Most enrolled in the ThL, the Licentiate in Theology. Many studied privately by reading the books prescribed for each unit because they were too far away from a theological college to attend lectures. Other students had the advantage of attending a theological college, like Moore or Ridley. But when you look at the institutional affiliation of the graduates, it is quite clear that many of them are doing their study in their communities—their towns and villages, including their churches—all over Australia and, in many cases, overseas. I began my theological education in 1975 when that way of studying theology began to change dramatically.

That was an important year, 1975. In that year a Bachelor of Theology degree was introduced. It marked the beginning of the idea that colleges could enter into an affiliation with the ACT. There were four original affiliated colleges—Moore, Ridley, the Bible College of Victoria and the Bible College of New Zealand (now Laidlaw College). Those colleges satisfied the approval criteria devised at that time by the Board of Delegates. The colleges taught the BTh on behalf of the ACT. To enrol in the BTh students had to be enrolled at a theological or Bible college affiliated with the ACT. Little has changed. We have further developed and refined the approval criteria. All affiliated colleges still deliver the ACT’s courses on our behalf.

In time the original four have grown to 18—some big by Australian standards, like Sydney Missionary and Bible College and Morling each with about 250 EFT enrolled in ACT courses, and some small like SOCS and Mary Andrews College with about 20-25 EFT each. Each affiliate has its unique character. Each has a sense of its market and clientele.

SOCS has always been very clear about this—it seeks to deliver ACT courses to people far and near who simply want to learn more about the Christian faith. If that leads to full- or part-time ministry, then that is a good, but not a necessary, goal of such study. The ACT is happy to endorse that ethos.

Since 1975 there has been an increasing emphasis on building up the physical resources of the colleges. Unlike the old ThL, the new BTh degree mandated attendance at an enrolling college with only limited opportunities for part-time study. The state higher education regulators also made sure that the affiliated colleges were sufficiently resourced to deliver degrees in theology and held the ACT accountable for ensuring that this was so. SOCS was the first affiliate to invest in distance education.

Gradually, especially in the last decade, the ACT has come to accept that it is possible to guarantee the integrity of theological education through modes of delivery other than full attendance mode. Many of us can see that information technology makes it possible for a college to deliver quality education through electronic means. The younger the student or lecturer the more he or she is aware that quality tertiary education can be delivered without the huge investment in plant and physical resources that it has taken some colleges a couple of generations to develop.

If the number of affiliated colleges has increased since 1975 the suite of accredited courses has also grown quite remarkably. It includes a professional doctorate, a research masters degree, several coursework masters degrees, undergraduate degrees and the undergraduate diplomas. The ACT has always provided a research doctorate or a course at that level.

Here are some quick facts about the ACT.

- When the ACT was founded in 1891 there were only four Australian universities—Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Tasmania.
- Since 1898 we have graduated 15,000 students, one quarter of these in the last 10 years.
- We have offered a research doctoral degree since the 1960s, and it rested on an earlier predecessor.
- We can rightly be called a national provider with longstanding affiliated colleges in each mainland state.
- We can truly be said to be a very successful ecumenical venture on the part of the Anglican Church of Australia. We embrace inter-denominational colleges and a number of Baptist, Presbyterian and Anglican colleges, one of which is SOCS.
- We remain the largest single Australian provider of theological education with 1400 EFT and 2500 students (2010 figures).
- Our colleges employ 125 EFT academic staff. Two-thirds of these are employed in a full-time capacity. That is a staggering number.
- Our research output frequently outranks our peers. Unlike the universities, all of that output is achieved without access to external government funding for candidates or for the colleges.

## 2. Recent developments in higher education policy.

A major breakthrough for the whole private higher education, non university, sector occurred in late 2003 when the Higher Education Support Act was passed by both Houses of Parliament. This opened up the way for private providers like the ACT to access an income contingent loan scheme called FEE-HELP. This scheme has had a dramatic effect on theological education in Australia, and on private higher education in general. Students don't have to save up the money first to go to college. They can take out a FEE-HELP tuition loan.

These days, however, a student can take out a loan and pay it back through the taxation system like HECS. Most providers, including the ACT, have experienced substantial increases in student numbers since the introduction of the FEE-HELP scheme in 2005.

One of the first acts of Julia Gillard, who became Kevin Rudd's Minister for Education when Labor won the 2007 election, was to appoint Emeritus Professor Denise Bradley to conduct a thorough review of higher education. A similar review had been conducted by Rod West, the former headmaster of Trinity Grammar School, 10 years before.

One of the key recommendations of the Bradley Report was the setting up of a national higher education registration and accreditation body to be called the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency or TEQSA. The draft legislation is now available for comment. Hopefully by the end of this year TEQSA will be established. Bradley actually proposed many of the recommendations contained in the West Report of 1997.

What TEQSA will provide is one national body in place of a multiplicity of state and territory higher education regulators. Because the ACT has had to deal with most of these state agencies, and we know how inefficient those dealings have sometimes proved to be, we wholeheartedly welcome the imminent establishment of the agency.

TEQSA will deliver a much more accountable and nationally consistent higher education sector than could ever have been the case under the state and territory arrangements. Not only will the private providers like the ACT be subject to TEQSA so also will the universities.

## 3. Some recent ACT achievements.

The revision of the national higher education protocols in 2007 opened up a pathway for non self-accrediting providers like the ACT to gain self-accrediting status, a privilege enjoyed by the universities.

The ACT set its sights on this goal, reformed its corporate and academic government in 2007 and 2008, and prepared an application for self-accrediting status in 2009. The assessment panel met in April 2010. In July 2010 we received the news that the ACT had been successful. Understandably our self-accrediting authority extends only to courses in theology and ministry. In accordance with the national protocols, our authority must be reviewed in five years, by April 2015.

The ACT is the first non self-accrediting institution in Australia to be granted self-accrediting status under the National Protocols. Being self-accrediting means that the state accreditation and registration authorities—the higher education regulators—have recognised the quality of our governance arrangements, the quality of our affiliated colleges and the quality of the educational experience our students gain. The regulators have acknowledged that the small and large colleges in partnership with the ACT truly work together to deliver quality assured outcomes in theological education.

They have endorsed the value of belonging to the ACT. They have endorsed the ACT as a quality-assured provider on a par with any university.

Now that the ACT has achieved the important goal of self-accreditation, I would like to begin exploring the advantages of seeking specialised university status. The Board of Directors and I want to commence a dialogue with our college stakeholders about the wisdom of making university status our next major institutional goal.

What will be the benefits?

There will be an obvious benefit in terms of status and recognition.

There will also be a financial benefit for our colleges and our students. Universities receive institutional funding and their students can take out a HECS loan to make up the difference between the full cost of tuition and the institutional funding from the commonwealth. Inclusion in this funding model will make ACT theological education about one-third cheaper than the current cost because a HECS loan is about one-third cheaper than a FEE-HELP loan which covers the full cost of tuition. Currently none of our colleges receive any institutional funding. Yet, theology students at Charles Sturt University, the Australian Catholic University, Murdoch, Flinders and Newcastle can take out a HECS loan.

But we know that that success in an application for university status will first involve increasing our research load and output so that they rank with the load and output of the humanities in our universities.

However, that is something we will not be able to achieve unless we receive government research funds now to boost research. This funding is something that the Melbourne College of Divinity, a long time self-accrediting institution and a current applicant for specialised university status, and the universities have had access for many years. We are currently at full stretch in our delivery of research degrees. If there is any funding at all, research is funded by churches, generous supporters and other external stakeholders. But commonwealth research funding would enable our research candidates to receive free tuition, grants would be available for special collections in college libraries, and there would be a possibility that some of our research candidates would receive Australian Postgraduate Awards and thus be paid an annual stipend of about \$25,000 to study full-time.

Again, the Melbourne College of Divinity and the universities delivering degrees in theology are supported financially by the government. The ACT and its affiliated colleges receive nothing.

But the good news is that as a self-accrediting institution the ACT now qualifies for federal research government funding. But we must first once be listed, hopefully soon this year, as a self-accrediting institution in the Higher Education Support Act 2003.

And in the meantime?

We will keep on doing what we do best, namely, delivering quality assured theological education as an academic preparation for ministry and providing opportunities for men and women to study the Christian faith. We are about best practice in the development of policies, procedures and educational outcomes for the benefit of our colleges, our students, and those who employ them.

We will continue to devote ourselves to transparent corporate and academic governance.

We will maintain our longstanding commitment to having external representatives on our boards and committees.

With our affiliated colleges, we will continue to express our partnership and cooperation by working together to provide quality education through our boards and committees, departmental meetings and other forums. We will continue to offer mentoring and guidance to those academic staff who are new to the enterprise of theological education and Christian studies.

We will continue to apply ourselves to continuous quality improvement. We have just had an external review of our Academic Board and its standing committees. We are about to go through the first re-accreditation of our suite of awards as a self-accrediting institution. We were the subject of a quality audit by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) in late 2006. In October this year we will be once again audited by AUQA as part of its five-yearly audit process. We have begun to prepare for that event.

We will continue to work for greater efficiencies across the ACT to free up academic staff to get on with lecturing, researching and supervising and to leave most of the dealings with government regulators to the ACT office.

We will continue to support our affiliated colleges, like SOCS, in their endeavour to equip students with the tools they need to be well-informed believers in the workplace. We will continue to partner our colleges in the task of preparing men and women for ministry.

We will remain committed to open, independent intellectual enquiry by academic staff and students. We are committed to maintaining a culture of research and good practice in teaching that is informed by the best scholarship in Biblical studies, theology and ministry and practice. We are unafraid to translate the faith once committed to the saints in terms that are faithful to the past and engaged with the present.

Finally, I would like to congratulate the graduands who have received their awards tonight. Well done to all of you. I sincerely trust that what you have learned and shared with your fellow students will truly make a difference to you and those to whom you are ministering.

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