



AUSTRALIAN COLLEGE OF THEOLOGY LIMITED
ACN 127 429 083

Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) Audit Progress Report

23 July 2008

AUQA conducted its audit of the Australian College of Theology (ACTh) on 16-17 November 2006. The Audit Report was released on 7 February 2007.

In April 2007 the College was contacted by Ms Lois Sparkes, Manager of the Quality Branch in the then Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). She requested the College to provide comment on three nominated Recommendations, namely, the Teaching and Learning Plan (Recommendation 2), the common evaluation of teaching instrument (Recommendation 5) and the development of a consortium-wide Quality Assurance Implementation Plan (Recommendation 7).

In August 2007 the College also provided an Action Plan to Ms Sparkes at the request of the then Minister for Education, the Hon Julie Bishop. The 15 page Plan included the Teaching and Learning Plan, comment on the implementation of the common teaching evaluation instrument, and the details of the Quality Management Implementation Plan. The Action Plan has been posted on the homepage of the ACTh's website (www.actheology.edu.au).

The following Progress Report was endorsed by the Board of Directors at its meeting on 21 July 2008. In effect it is the Board's response to the deficiencies and challenges noted in the Audit Report of February 2007, and especially in the eight Recommendations.

The College notes the principle of AUQA that it is not enough simply to go through the audit process. AUQA defines a "successful audit" in the following way:

"A successful quality audit" is a credible one. A "credible" quality audit—

1. reaches significant conclusions and
2. is based on incontrovertible evidence
3. which results in subsequent action, and
4. commands general agreement across the auditee's constituencies that the audit's conclusions are "about right"

The Dean can report that in early 2007 the ACTh's academic boards and the then Board of Delegates agreed that criteria 1, 2 and 4 above had been met. Resolutions to that effect were recorded in the minutes of each meeting. Whether or not the third criterion has been met can only be determined at the time of the writing of the Progress Report and in monitoring improvements that take place after the audit. Accordingly, in the light of quality improvements put into effect since the audit, the Board of Directors resolved on 21 July 2008 that the ACTh's quality audit was successful in terms of all four criteria above.

Brief comments are offered below on two of the Commendations before addressing each of the Affirmations and Recommendations.

Commendation 2

AUQA commends ACTh for adopting a proactive stance towards reforming the corporate governance arrangements that exist under its current constitution and the requirements of canon law of the Anglican Church.

During 2006 and 2007 the Board and the former Council of the College took decisive action to ensure that the ACTh Council Inc was registered with ASIC as a company limited by guarantee, and that a new constitution for the ACTh Limited was endorsed first by the Council and then approved by the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia. The Council was registered with ASIC as a company in September 2007 and the new constitution was approved by the Synod in October.

The new constitution addresses deficiencies in corporate and academic governance that were underscored by the NSW Department of Education and Training in April 2006 and the scoping study of the governance of the ACTh conducted by the National Institute for Governance in September of that year. The 2007 constitution vests corporate governance unambiguously in a Board of Directors that has succeeded the Board of Delegates, and anticipates the imminent establishment of a single Academic Board by the Directors. Relevant policies for a company have been approved or are in development.

Commendation 4

AUQA commends ACTh for its assessment moderation process as the centrepiece of its academic quality management system, which has been made more robust through the establishment of an Academic Audit Committee.

The commending of the moderation process is welcome. Since 1992 moderation has served to establish and maintain consistent standards across the whole ACTh network, not only ensuring high quality educational outcomes but also a parity of esteem among affiliated colleges. Pleasingly AUQA has invited the College to submit a description of the rationale and working of the moderation process for its Good Practice Database. The proposal was submitted in June 2008.

Affirmation 1

AUQA affirms ACTh's decision to revise and strengthen the College's existing board and committee structure.

With the election of the first Board of Directors under the new constitution of the ACTh Ltd in May 2008 the way was clear for the Board to establish its own committee or committees to address formally aspects of corporate governance such as risk management and compliance but also to establish the Academic Board with terms of reference agreed in 2007 by the interim Board. The meeting of the Directors on 21 July 2008 resolved to approve the membership of the Academic Board, to conduct elections of members not yet appointed to the Board, and to hold an initial meeting early in second semester.

It was further resolved to seek the services of Dr Anne Cusick, a governance expert at UWS and chair of the Academic Senate, to conduct an audit of the developing academic governance structures of the ACTh for the benefit of the Board of Directors. Incidentally, it should be noted that the AUQA Audit Report of UWS explicitly commended UWS for its "strong corporate and academic governance" (see UWS AUQA Audit Report [January 2007], Commendation 1).

Note also the comments on Affirmation 3 below.

Affirmation 2

AUQA affirms the willingness of the College to support the provision of distance education as witnessed at Morling College; and as reported at Malyon College; the Bible College of Victoria; and Ridley College.

The provision of distance education at degree level in the ACTh has had but a comparatively brief history. The delivery of the Bachelor of Ministry in distance mode was approved in 2003. Since then there have been proposals substantially to extend the present limit of 33% of the Bachelor of Theology and the Master of Divinity that might be delivered in distance mode. Interest on the part of ACTh affiliates to deliver in distance and on-line mode continues unabated, and has recently been extended to Mueller College the eighth affiliated college to be approved to offer units in distance and on-line mode.

Affirmation 3

AUQA affirms ACTh's decision to introduce a more robust and centralised approach to quality assurance including: involving the new single Academic Board in the approval of the appointment of academic staff to lecture at all levels; stronger monitoring and reporting of academic performance through the MOUs, five year reviews and annual reports; and development of arrangements for the benchmarking of academic performance across the consortium, and externally.

As noted above (see Affirmation 1) the 2007 constitution of the ACTh Ltd envisages the introduction of a single Academic Board. The interim Board of Directors approved the terms of reference in 2007. At its meeting on 21 July 2008 the Board approved the categories of membership and cleared the way for a second semester inaugural meeting.

Formal approval of academic staff who do not possess the normal academic requirements to lecture at the level nominated by their employing college, especially at undergraduate and Master of Divinity levels, will be managed by the proposed Academic Quality Committee when it is established by the Academic Board in second semester 2008.

A more thorough monitoring and reporting of academic performance through the five-year affiliated college reviews and the annual reports is one of the key responsibilities of Dr Ken Wade, the ACTh's Quality Manager. The annual affiliated college report proforma has been supplemented to ensure that a number of key issues not hitherto addressed are now reported.

The opportunity for external input regarding the quality of the ACTh's moderation process already exists with the Bible College of New Zealand's annual audit. The reports for 2006, 2007 and 2008 have been submitted to the Coursework Awards Board at its first meeting of each year. The Teaching and Learning Plan foreshadows entering into a benchmarking partnership Tyndale-Carey Graduate School in Auckland and with a major international provider of theological education.

The Board of Directors has also noted that any application for self-accrediting status will require evidence that all aspects of the College's institutional performance have been benchmarked against Australian self-accrediting and relevant international institutions. The Committee of Deans of Theology, a peak body initially comprising ecumenical consortia that has been operating since 1997, presents an increasing number of opportunities for benchmarking policies, processes and institutional resourcing as well as attrition, progression and graduation data. Membership of the Committee has been recently extended beyond the consortia to several university departments (ACU, CSU) and to Avondale College, an aspiring university. In August 2007 the Committee was successful in securing a 100K non-competitive grant from the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching (now the Australian Learning and Teaching Council) to undertake a discipline-based initiative study of theology across all providers in Australia (with input from providers in NZ). This will create a large array of data on matters such as progression, graduation, retention and attrition rates and other aspects of teaching and learning where little or no comparative data exists at present. The project was

inaugurated in early 2008. The Project Manager, the Rev Dr Charles Sherlock, has recently produced a preliminary report on his findings at the Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools (ANZATS) annual conference in Auckland. The final report will be available in February 2009.

The Board of Directors has resolved to strengthen quality assurance for delivery in all modes (including on-line mode) through the establishing of the Academic Quality Committee as a standing committee of the Academic Board.

Affirmation 4

AUQA affirms the need for ACTh to develop a risk-managed, succession plan for the current Dean and CEO, to ensure that the momentum for quality assurance and improvement that has been gathered is sustained throughout the College in the longer term.

The Board of Directors has sought to address the issue of succession during the last few years. The appointment of Elizabeth Kohn in May 2006 to oversee the ACTh's administration of research candidates and MA students resulted from the acknowledgement that Anne Bates' duties were requiring her to spend more time on DEST/DEEWR reporting. The more recent appointment of Ken Wade as Quality Manager was partly prompted by the need to bring one or two more people into the ACTh office who have substantial higher education experience, especially in the quality assurance sector. The Directors have created the new position of Associate Dean. Interviews will be conducted on Monday 28 July. One of the roles of the Associate Dean will be to act as interim dean when the Dean is absent on holidays or study leave.

Recommendation 1

As the College plans to seek self-accrediting institutional status, AUQA recommends that ACTh review its statement of institutional objectives to ensure that they focus clearly on desired ends, including those that will be required for self-accrediting institutional status.

The last statement of the College's Vision which appears at the very end of the 2006 statement of the College's Mission, Objectives, Values and Vision expresses the ACTh's institutional aspirations in the following terms:

“The College will be in a position to secure self-accrediting status and modified university title in accordance with the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes (July 2006).”

The object of the College, as expressed in the former constitution of the ACTh Council Inc, read as follows:

“The [purpose of the] College [is] to foster and direct the systematic study of Divinity...”

In May 2007 the Board of Delegates and the Council approved a new constitution that was subsequently adopted by the October meeting of the General Synod. In that document the objects of the ACTh are now expressed as follows:

“The objects of the College shall be to foster and direct the systematic study of theology and other disciplines related to Christian ministry by teaching and research in a manner and at a level commensurate with the practices of Australian universities by:

- (a) awarding higher education qualifications in theology and other disciplines related to Christian ministry equivalent to awards offered in Australian universities, and delivering the related courses in a variety of modes; and
- (b) engaging in student-centred teaching and learning, through each affiliated college, that advances knowledge, encourages free and open enquiry, and enhances the pursuit of

- vocational excellence; and
- (c) facilitating each affiliated college's realisation of the full potential of its formational, educative and scholarly endeavour; and
 - (d) fostering and enhancing a culture of research and scholarship across the College that leads to new knowledge and original creative endeavour; and
 - (e) promoting the study of theology and other disciplines related to Christian ministry in the wider community; and
 - (f) enhancing the higher education status of the College; and
 - (g) underpinning these objects through governance, procedural rules, policies, financial arrangements and planning, and quality assurance processes which are sufficient to ensure the academic integrity of the College's academic programs."

These objects express the ACTh's institutional aspirations in a more decisive manner than hitherto and clearly link the College's institutional aspirations and performance to the university sector.

Recommendation 2

AUQA recommends that the ACTh secretariat enter into immediate discussions with the affiliated colleges in order to develop a comprehensive consortium-wide learning and teaching plan.

The Teaching and Learning Plan 2008–2010 was drafted early in 2007. It was sent to each affiliated college and discussed by the Coursework Awards Board in May 2007. It was a major item on the agenda of the mid year Consortium Conference. After the Conference, the Board of Delegates formally approved the Plan at its meeting on 23 July.

The Teaching and Learning Plan can be accessed at Appendix A of the Action Plan posted on the home page of the ACTh website. Hard copies were distributed to each affiliated college registrar and the members of the ACTh's boards and committees.

The Plan establishes a specific set of seven strategic learning and teaching goals. The goals have been derived from the ACTh's Statement of Mission, Objectives, Values and Vision. Each goal is served by a number of initiatives, a statement of the desired outcome and the year in which the outcome is to be reached, an assessment of the priority of the initiative, and the person (or entity) chiefly responsible for the carriage of the initiative.

At the Consortium Conference held on 21 June 2008 the Dean spoke to a paper detailing progress achieved thus far towards realising each of the initiatives. One recent development has been the implementation of a process by which examiners of research theses are invited to rank the quality of the theses of ACTh candidates against those they have previously examined.

Recommendation 3

AUQA recommends that ACTh establish a task force to develop a comprehensive consortium-wide research and scholarship management plan, that will establish priorities and targets for the development of an enhanced ACTh research and scholarship profile.

From its inception, the ACTh has aspired to being an institution in which research was conducted and a research culture fostered. The ACTh's research doctorate, the Doctor of Theology degree, was first introduced in 1964 and built on a legacy of research activity among Australian Anglican scholars stretching back to the early 20th Century.

The Research and Scholarship Management Plan 2008–2010 was drafted in early 2007, and circulated to affiliated colleges and members of the Research Awards Board for comment. At the Consortium Conference in June 2007 the Plan was the subject of extensive discussion. Amendments

recommended on the day were incorporated in the final draft before its approval by the then Board of Delegates on 23 July 2007.

The Plan can be accessed on the home page of the ACTh website. Hard copies were distributed to each affiliated college registrar and the members of the ACTh's boards and committees.

The Plan establishes a specific set of six strategic research and scholarship goals. The goals have been derived from the ACTh's Statement of Mission, Objectives, Values and Vision. As with the Teaching and Learning Plan, each goal is served by a number of initiatives, a statement of the desired outcome and a year in which the outcome is to be reached, an assessment of the priority of the initiative, and the person (or entity) chiefly responsible for the carriage of the initiative.

The Plan acknowledges the need to enhance research training and urges the early participation of HDR candidates in regular college-based research colloquia as part of a confirmation of candidature process that has been in place from the beginning of 2008.

At the Consortium Conference held on 21 June 2008 the Dean spoke to a paper detailing progress achieved thus far towards realising each of the initiatives.

Recommendation 4

AUQA recommends that ACTh investigate the further development of the Theological Academic Management System so that it can be used as an effective information management system, for the collection and more systematic monitoring and reporting on quality processes and outcomes.

The establishing of the IT Committee in the latter half of 2006 created a formal mechanism by which the efficiency of TAMS can be monitored and improvements canvassed. Three of the five members represent affiliated colleges. In early January 2007 the Academic Administrator met with the TAMS developers at Ridley College. There was another meeting in Sydney in November that year. The Academic Administrator has held regular TAMS training sessions with affiliated college registrars.

The AUQA Report has noted the expectation that a student portal would be an enhancement to the system as would be the ability to import results from other computer programs and the building of assessment modules. The portal was deployed in first semester 2008 thus allowing final results to be accessed online for the first time. An assessment module allowing the input of individual assessment marks and auto calculation of final unit grades and percentages has been operating since second semester 2007. The capacity to import results from other computer systems is a work in progress.

The Recommendation also draws attention to the Audit Panel's belief that TAMS should be further enhanced "to accommodate the changes that are envisaged as being necessary for the ACTh's quality management system". TAMS is now able to produce reports on attrition, progression and graduation rates. In May 2007 and 2008 the ACTh office used these facilities to provide statistical data to the Queensland Office of Higher Education as part of the College's annual reporting requirements.

The following are additional major improvements and enhancements of TAMS that have occurred during 2007 and 2008. This list does not take account of minor ongoing revisions that are a normal part of any student record system.

- New class attendance record sheet.
- Improvements to reporting options.
- Additional fields to record graduation data such as parchment numbers.
- Additional fields to take account of new DEEWR reporting requirements.
- Amendments to DEEWR reporting outputs to account for shift from DESTPAC to HEPCAT.
- Improved search function for scheduled units.
- Ability to allow ACT staff to edit field names to suit affiliated college needs.

Recommendation 5

AUQA recommends that in consultation with the affiliated colleges, ACTh adopt a common student evaluation of teaching instrument with a core of common assessment items and a bank of elective questions that can be customised by the affiliated colleges to take into account different delivery modes and institutional contexts.

During 2007 the Dean and Academic Administrator worked closely with the Institute for Teaching and Learning (ITL) at Sydney University to develop such an instrument for student evaluation of teaching across the various modes of delivery. The Board chose to evaluate one core unit each semester on a rolling basis. The results will be reported to the Academic Quality Committee when it is established by the Academic Board and to individual colleges.

The unit evaluation instrument was first deployed in first semester 2008. The data for first semester has now been processed both in aggregate and also in college specific terms. The aggregated first semester 2008 consortium-wide results will be tabled at the Coursework Awards Board at its meeting on 1 August 2008. Colleges will now be requested to comment on the results and address deficiencies in the light of the ACTh's KPI of 75% of respondents in the two most positive categories of "strongly agree" and "agree".

It is envisaged that in addition to colleges conducting their own evaluations and acting upon them, the Academic Quality Committee may choose to request individual colleges to evaluate additional units. The evaluation instrument consists of a core of common assessment items with space for affiliated colleges to ask up to four elective questions. The evaluation instrument is posted in the secure registrar's section of the ACTh website. Confirmation has been sought from the ITL for the adaption of the survey in this fashion.

Recommendation 6

AUQA recommends that in consultation with the affiliated colleges, ACTh develop a common external stakeholder survey with a core of common items and a bank of elective items that can be customised by the affiliated colleges to take into account the different college missions, organisational cultures, and traditions.

An ACTh stakeholder survey with a core of common items and space for elective questions was developed in June 2008 after consultation with a number of affiliated college principals. The Dean has invited three colleges to survey their stakeholders and to report the results by the end of August 2008.

The survey is now posted in the secure registrar's section of the ACTh website.

Recommendation 7

AUQA recommends that in consultation with the affiliated colleges, ACTh develop a consortium-wide quality assurance implementation plan to address the many improvement actions identified by the College in its self-review, and including the findings of this Audit Report.

Consideration of a consortium-wide Quality Assurance Plan that addresses deficiencies noted in the Audit Report was a matter for discussion at the Consortium Conference held in mid 2007.

As noted above the details of the Plan were provided to Ms Lois Sparkes at the request of the Minister in August 2007 (as part of the ACTh Action Plan) and have been posted on the home page of the ACTh website.

Three main initiatives are detailed in the Plan. The first two of these are in operation with the third to be inaugurated in the second half of 2008:

(1) The most significant quality assurance initiative identified in the 2006 ACTh Self-review was the establishment of the Academic Audit Committee (now called the Moderation Committee). The purpose of this committee is to address the formal deficiencies noted by unit field moderators in their end of semester reports to the Departmental Heads. Accordingly, at the end of each semester the Dean writes a memo to colleges detailing issues that the moderators indicated in their reports to the Heads that all colleges should address and college-specific issues relating to teaching and learning in individual units. Responses from colleges are carefully monitored by the Dean to ensure that action to be taken to redress deficiencies is appropriate. It will be of considerable interest to the Academic Board and the Departmental Heads to monitor the extent to which moderators report that improvements are continually taking place. So far the moderators and the Heads are seeing positive trends emerging, especially with respect to the incidence of compliance with the moderation process, the introduction of a moderation cover sheet processed by each affiliated college registrar, and a positive trend towards greater consistency with ACTh grade array expectations.

(2) The ACTh Quality Manager, Dr Ken Wade, has been conforming all new ACTh policies to a formal policy template approved by the Board of Directors in 2007. He has also been developing new policies for consideration by the academic boards that are consistent with policies operating in the university sector. This initiative has increasingly brought the ACTh's processes and procedures more into line with university practice. For example, one policy developed in 2007 and now operative deals with confirmation of HDR candidature. The policy addresses the need for HDR candidates to be included quickly into regular college-based research colloquia as participants, their progress in this regard to be formally noted in the annual candidate progress report. The Directors believe that this initiative with respect to existing policies and policy development will constitute a significant enhancement of the College's quality assurance.

(3) The Board of Directors has approved the establishment of the Academic Quality Committee as a standing committee of the Academic Board. The terms of reference include approval of lecturers who do not formally meet minimum educational qualifications to lecture, consideration of data from the CEQs and student evaluations of units, and the approval of means of delivery and resourcing of units regardless of mode.

The Audit Report also draws attention to additional matters that bear on institutional quality assurance such as the (a) close monitoring of institutional quality through the annual affiliated college reports, (b) the importance of establishing a single Academic Board, and (c) the work of the newly formed Course Advisory Committees. With respect to (a) the Dean can report that the Academic Administrator has continued to monitor institutional quality through a consolidated report to the Directors that shows deficiencies that have come to light in her monitoring of annual reports. With respect to (b) the Academic Board is about to hold its inaugural meeting. Its composition was the subject of considerable discussion at the June 2008 Consortium Conference. As noted above, the 21 July 2008 meeting of the Board approved the categories of membership. With respect to (c) the reports and recommendations of the Course Advisory Committees that have been meeting since the end of 2006 are tabled at the first meetings of the present academic boards in the following year with action taken as necessary.

Recommendation 8

AUQA recommends that ACTh develop a comprehensive change-management communication strategy to ensure that planned changes to be introduced are fully known and understood across the consortium.

In February 2007 the Dean began a series of electronic newsletters to ensure that principals of affiliated colleges, the members of the now superseded ACTh Council, and the members of the College are apprised of developments taking place across the consortium and of the initiatives of the Board. Three newsletters were published in 2007, with another three planned for 2008. Their text is posted on the ACTh website. Matters covered have been the outcome of the AUQA Audit, progress

towards a new governance structure, the work of the Moderation Committee, the IT Committee and Course Advisory Committees, the outcome of the application to the Carrick Institute for a grant to fund a scoping study of teaching and learning in theology and the implementation of the project, and changes in personnel in the ACTh office. It is envisaged that these newsletters will continue to be posted tri-annually.

A report of the Dean has been tabled at several academic board meetings since the beginning of 2007. The office has returned to a former practice of posting detailed memoranda to affiliated colleges after the board meetings noting decisions made and the providing the content of new policies that have been approved.

Since 2008 the Director's secure section of the ACTh website has contained a repository of Board minutes together with the Constitution and the Statement of Mission, Objectives, Values and Vision. The ACTh office has also created secure sites for teachers, registrars, users of Endnote, and the members of the ACTh College Ltd. The papers for the Consortium Conference were also placed in a secure section. Once the Academic Board is in place its members will have their own secure section.

Since mid 2006 ACTh policies have been posted on the website. This initiative was prompted by responses to the survey of affiliated college registrars in mid 2005. The Academic Administrator's meeting with registrars in each capital city in 2005 was repeated in April/May 2007. The 2006 registrar's conference was repeated in May 2008 much to the satisfaction of the attendees.



Mark Harding
Dean and CEO
Australian College of Theology Limited
Suite 4, Level 6, 51 Druitt Street
Sydney NSW 2000
Phone : (+61 2) 9262 7890
Fax : (+61 2) 9262 7290
Email: mharding@actheology.edu.au
CRICOS : 02650E, 02788J, 02809J, 02558A
ACN : 127 429 083