

**RESPONSE OF THE AUSTRALIAN COLLEGE OF THEOLOGY
TO THE WEST REVIEW POLICY DISCUSSION PAPER**

In addition to submitting a joint response from the Committee of Deans of Theological Consortia, the Australian College of Theology welcomes the opportunity to respond to the West Review Policy Discussion Paper, *Learning for Life*. We commend the Review Committee's commitment to life-long learning as an enhancement of the quality and dignity of human life, its forward-thinking proposals regarding options for the financing of learning and teaching in the higher education sector, and its evident high regard for the contribution theological education has made and continues to make to Australian society and the public good.

More specifically we wish to respond as follows:

1. Accreditation (see *Learning for Life*, pp. 31–33)

Over many years the committees and boards of the Australian College of Theology (ACT), in collaboration with the member institutions of the College, has advanced the enterprise and the quality of theological education on a national basis within its network. The consortium can point to a sustained level of cooperation between its member institutions without sectarian rancour, the high quality of institutional library and lecturing facilities (a matter repeatedly noted by bodies which accredit our awards), the enhancement of research and publishing profiles among faculty, and the quality of graduates engaged in reflective and creative ministry in modern Australian society.

It is for this reason that the College deplores the current practice of state accrediting authorities to accredit independent, and often small, private providers to teach theology at degree level. In effect this practice undermines the mission of the College, as well as the other established consortia, to continue to advance and foster cooperative quality control strategies, to provide forums for theological dialogue across confessional traditions and to contribute constructively to an emerging national identity founded on the ideals of respect for other cultures and traditions.

Moreover, the states threaten to fragment the credibility of theological education in Australia. There is evidence that the panels of review established by some state higher education authorities do not include representatives of the established consortia, notwithstanding the wealth of experience and insight such representation might bring to these panels. In a recent example, one of our degree colleges submitted to the higher education authorities in Queensland a proposal for its own Bachelor of Ministries degree and a Graduate Diploma. The courses were reviewed by a panel of five, the only theological expert on that panel being a lecturer (without a doctorate) from a small, independent private provider. Some private providers proceed to claim the dubious point that since they are accredited by state authorities they and their degrees have the same status and credibility as the degrees of the established consortia.

The Australian College of Theology, in common with the other established consortia, is firmly of the opinion that the current system of state accrediting bodies for private providers in the theological and other disciplines will only deliver greater sectarian and fundamentalist outcomes in the theological higher education sector. Religious ghettos will result. For this reason the Policy Discussion Paper's foreshadowing of an accrediting agency which would operate independently of the providers (see pp. 32–33) heralds a starting point for discussion towards producing a much more attractive outcome for the whole enterprise of theological education in multi-cultural Australia than that currently operating. We would argue that all providers in the theological arena should submit themselves to the scrutiny of the accrediting body the Review proposes.

Furthermore, the College also submits that the proposed accrediting body be organised at the federal and national, not state, level. As a national consortium the College finds it particularly difficult to work with each separate state authority. It has lost faith in the integrity of the higher education authorities operating in some states. It continues to regard as inappropriate the accrediting of a national body by a state agency. Recent overtures to DEETYA arising out of our August meeting with members of the West Review have reinforced our sense of unease with the devolution of accrediting authority to the states. The Policy Discussion Paper offers a substantial way forward on this front.

The College has been urged by Education Victoria to correct the figure of \$40,000 which we noted in our submission would be paid to that body over the period 1997–2001 inclusive in the form of endorsement and accreditation fees levied on providers registered in states other than Victoria. The figure is, in fact, ca. \$32,000. However, we are anticipating the accrediting of two new postgraduate courses—a Doctor of Ministries and a Master of Christian Studies—over the next 12 months. Accordingly the expected cost over the coming five year period will be raised from \$32,000 to \$48,000.

2. Research

The College confirms that there is a strong nexus between research and teaching, and that all theological programs must be built on a foundation of national intellectual capital which justifies public funding. Moreover the College endorses the sentiment that “all higher education institutions should have access to research infrastructure/funding on a merit basis and as a matter of right, whether they are in the public or the private sectors” (*Learning for Life*, p. 74). For that reason the College strongly submits that the faculty of the established consortia have access to the ARC grant scheme and that there be provision for a number of postgraduate scholarships for doctoral candidates enrolled within the Theological Consortia.

In addition to providing ministerial and vocational training for ordained and non-ordained ministers in the Christian churches, theological research contributes to the implementation of government policies in:

- ◆ *Social Welfare* through research into youth work, prison-chaplaincy, aged care, drug and alcohol rehabilitation studies.
- ◆ *Aboriginal Affairs, Multiculturalism* through studies in Aboriginal Studies, Missiology and Pastoral Studies.

- ◆ *Environment, Education and Training* through postgraduate participation in many programs offering literacy and numeracy skills as well as specific vocational skills operated by various church-sponsored agencies.
- ◆ *Health* through postgraduate involvement in health care, hospital chaplaincy, clinical pastoral education programs, palliative care, as well as research, writing and studies in Christian ethics.

Moreover, the provision of scholarships in theology for postgraduate students will stem the flow of candidates tempted to leave Australia to pursue studies overseas. In addition, the provision of postgraduate theological education for numbers of overseas students, undertaken primarily as a service to sister churches, enhances Australia's reputation as an exporter of quality education and contributes to maintaining good relations with the Asia-Pacific rim.

Underpinning the offering of postgraduate and postdoctoral research and involvement in the above areas is the commitment of the Christian churches to social justice and equity principles for Australian society. The College believes Commonwealth governments share this commitment.

3. Finance

The College applauds the Policy Discussion Paper for its statement that:

The principle that public funding should be provided to non-Government education providers in the schools and VET sectors has been readily accepted by the Australian community. From the students' point of view, there are great inequities in arrangements which provide funding for study in one institution rather than another based on whether or not an institution is defined as "public" or "private". The "public" benefits flowing from privately provided higher education are arguably as great as those flowing from public education.

Restricting funding to a certain set of "public" institutions represents one of the greatest impediments to the development of a private higher education sector in Australia. The highly subsidised nature of education at public universities makes it difficult for private institutions to compete for students in terms of price. Australia stands to benefit from the diversity which would be offered from a wider range of private provider (Learning for Life, p. 21).

It is clear to the established consortia, including the Australian College of Theology, that the lack of a so-called "level playing field" in this area is a severe handicap and an injustice. It is a handicap to the provision of high quality higher education in the discipline of theology as the cost of developing, monitoring and providing tertiary education in theology for the many persons undertaking study in this discipline can no longer be borne by the churches alone. Partnership is essential. The vast majority of those studying theology at the major theological institutions in Australia are not doing so for purposes of a church-related vocation or ordination but for other reasons. At one major institution the number of those undertaking study for the purposes of ordination is less than 8% out of a student body of 2,091. The continuance of a lack of the extension of income contingent loans and public funding to those students who undertake the study of theology as against those who study, say, art history cannot be justified.

It is no solution to insist that theology come totally under the aegis of the universities as the discipline requires a practising community for its roots. A partnership which recognises the requirements of the state and also those of the discipline itself is necessary.

Thus the Australian College of Theology supports the extension of public funding to appropriate private institutions.

Along with funding comes accountability, and this the College welcomes. It may be true that some private educational institutions “do not wish to become part of the Unified National System (envisaging) that a less regulated higher education sector will allow institutions to be more sensitive to client needs” (*Learning for Life*, p. 73). However, the College is convinced that the high level of accountability at academic, financial and structural levels which the major theological institutions represented in the established consortia have experienced—in our case since 1891—is a good thing for the discipline. Such accountability, together with public funding, can only add to the public benefit the study of theology already offers to Australia.

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Chair
Board of Delegates
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Sydney
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