

# Evaluation of *Knowledge and Innovation* Reforms

A submission from the Melbourne College of Divinity

10 September 2003



## **Preamble**

The Melbourne College of Divinity is among the smaller recipients of Commonwealth government research funding. It also one of the two private, degree-granting bodies established by Act of Parliament that are included in Schedule 1 of the *Higher Education Funding Act* (1988). Although affiliated with the University of Melbourne since 1993, the College retains its independence as a centre of excellence for the education and training of anyone interested in pursuing theological studies, including Christian clergy and lay people. True to the prohibition against applying any religious test to its students in the *Melbourne College of Divinity Act* (1910), it also constitutes Australia's best resourced centre for more 'disinterested' religious studies. As a result of this dual focus, and with what is reputedly the Southern Hemisphere's best theological research library (the Joint Theological Library, situated in Ormond College, University of Melbourne), the MCD attracts, in proportion to its size, a high number of Higher Degree by Research students, many from Asia, Polynesia or the wider Pacific region, who look to the MCD as the premier theological research institution in the region.

This brief outline gives some sense of the MCD's distinctiveness and of the factors which drive its commitment to research excellence. In particular, given that we are quite unlike the public universities in structure and focus, we welcome the emphasis on diversity in the higher education sector which underpins the government's reforms (as expressed in the Minister's *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future* paper and elsewhere). We also welcome this opportunity to comment on the recent reforms and current proposals for change. Looking forward to a continuing commitment to diversity in the sector, this short submission draws attention to two aspects of the reforms which have impacted directly upon us, and offers a comment on two of the potential, broader strategic changes considered at the Melbourne DEST information seminar on this evaluation.

## **RTS Scheme**

A number of people at the Melbourne DEST Information Seminar expressed their dissatisfaction with the way RTS places had been allocated at the beginning of the current reforms. Prof Pip Hamilton's remark that they seem to have been allocated "at random" was affirmed by many of those present.

At the MCD this is a particular problem. We were awarded five RTS places in the initial allocation. Over the past two years, due to our research performance, we have been awarded five APAs and two IPRs, and it seems likely given this year's

performance that we will be awarded another two APAs and possibly an IPRS in 2004. In order to provide the fee-relief and other benefits of an RTS place, we are forced to divert money from other sources to fund these additional places, and thus are unable to spend that money on fostering excellence in research in other aspects of the College's life. We are, in short, being penalised for our success under the scholarships' allocation formulae. Obviously the larger, better resourced universities are more easily able to allocate funds to cover this shortfall. For us, and for other smaller institutions, the need to cover this gap is beginning to have considerable impact on our research budget.

It may be that we are suffering an unintended penalty through the operation of the RTS allocation formula at the smaller end of the scale. Whatever the cause, it cannot be the government's intention to penalise good research performance, and we would welcome any re-consideration of this situation.

### **Capping**

The MCD would be pleased to see the removal of the current 5% cap on research funding. This is, of course, partly because we are severely disadvantaged by its operation, forfeiting some 30% of the funding we would otherwise receive through our performance under the two formulae. However, it is more because its removal is an essential and consistent step towards achieving the government's reforms. The 'cap' played an important initial role in softening the changes introduced by the *Knowledge and Innovation* reforms. But as long as the 'cap' is in place, the incentive for all institutions to change their existing practices is reduced. In our own institution, in particular, attempts to affect changes that would further enhance our research performance are hampered by the rejoinder that it will make little difference: "What's the point?", the reluctant say. It's a good question, and a question that must be posed in other institutions, both large and small. The best response would be the removal of the 'cap'.

### **A move to something like the UK's RAE scheme?**

Much attention was given at the Information Seminar to the possibilities of a move to something like HEFCE's RAE model. The MCD stands to gain much by this, as its publication record is strong and a considerable amount of that research is of international significance. However, we believe that such a move would be unwise for the following reasons:

- (i) *The RAE formula undermines the government's commitment to diversity in higher education.* The existing RTS and IGS formulae, by incorporating a

variety of competitive measures of excellence, allow institutions greater flexibility in developing their research programmes. For example, a university could (conceivably) not set a high store on supervising HDR students, but might be very good at forging partnerships with local industry or community groups. Under the current arrangement that university is rewarded for its ability at partnerships. Under the RAE formula it is not.

- (ii) *The RAE formula accords no weight to excellence in supervision.* Generating world class research is important, but it is only one aspect of a healthy research culture. Equally valuable is a commitment to training the researchers of the future. Under the RAE formula there is no reward for those institutions that work hard at achieving excellence in supervision, collecting strong numbers of HDR students by their reputation for supervision. The RAE simply assumes that the best researchers are also the best supervisors, a dubious assumption at best. Teaching excellence, albeit at the undergraduate level, is one of the Minister's key principles in his *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future* paper. It is equally important at the HDR level, and any chance in the formula which accorded it less weight would be regrettable.
- (iii) *The RAE formula undermines key aspects of a thriving research culture.* Certainly the introduction of the RAE model in the UK brought bracing changes for the better with it, not least a more intentional approach to research strategy and activity. However, it also produced less positive results. Focussing all the attention on publications produced a rivalry and professional jealousy in the Higher Education sector. These things undermined the virtues of collaboration and generosity in the sharing of information that are essential to the nurture of a healthy research culture. Again the current formulae, spreading the weight of achievement across a variety of indicators, reduce these negatives by allowing universities to succeed in more than one research area.

### **Increasing the weighting of publications**

The Issues Paper notes some criticisms of the current 10% weighting accorded to publications in the competitive formulae, in particular the tendency of the low weighting to skew the focus of research activity, creating "an adverse behavioural impact out of all proportion to any distributional impact". Some of these concerns could be met by increasing the weight of publications in the formulae. There must be a middle position between the current situation and the RAE model, in which

publications could be better rewarded as a good, objective measure of one aspect of research excellence without achieving the equally unbalanced and dominating position they occupy in the RAE. For example, the IGS formula could be amended to: Research Income (40%) + Research student load (30%) + Publications (30%).

As long as publications remain at only 10% of the model, the introduction of a quality weighting remains impracticable. The energy and expense devoted to adjudicating the weighting could hardly be justified in terms of the “distributional impact”. Were publications to increase in weighting, however, the introduction of such weighting becomes more desirable. The MCD would welcome its introduction, again partly because it would increase our funding, but also because it would encourage our research-active staff to aim higher than they currently need to.

### **Conclusion**

The MCD would welcome the opportunity to participate further in discussions and development of the future model, in particular with regard to the impact of the new model on the smaller institutions. Queries about this submission should be address to the Revd Dr Timothy Gaden, the MCD’s Research Coordinator at [t.gaden@mcd.edu.au](mailto:t.gaden@mcd.edu.au) or by telephone on (03) 9853 3177.

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