

Australian Theological Education: Issues for the AUQA Audit Process

Charles Sherlock

*Manager, Australian Learning & Teaching Council Discipline-Based Initiative Project,
'Uncovering Theology: the depth, reach & utility of Australian Theological Education',
and
Executive Officer, Australia & New Zealand Association of Theological Schools, Australia*

Abstract:

Theological education has functioned in Australia for over 150 years, but until the 1970s largely operated in 'parallel' to the universities. In the last decade it has grown and diversified; theological institutions are now playing a role in higher education generally.

An AUQA audit is primarily concerned with the quality assurance of a tertiary institution's educational goals, which necessitates not only issues of pedagogy, but human resources, governance and viability. For theological HEPs, these matters have a distinctive flavour, due to the long heritage of theological education, and varying degrees of church support and accountability. In particular, the educational ethos of most theological institutions seeks to engage students in learning within a context of academic freedom that takes explicit account of their formation as persons open to a Christian worldview.

This paper seeks to explicate these issues, and offer suggestions as to how theology HEPs may appropriately be assessed for quality assurance through the AUQA process. It will be based on insights gained both from the Uncovering Theology project, and the experience of HEPs which have undergone an AUQA audit.

Keywords: theological education, formative education, academic freedom

* * *

Introduction

Several theology HEPs have participated in Cycle 1 AUQA audits: the *Melbourne College of Divinity* (2005, when the author was its Registrar), the *Australian College of Theology* (2006) – both being consortia – and the stand-alone institutions *Moore Theological College* (2008) and *Avondale College* (2008). The *Uncovering Theology* project, funded by the *Australian Learning and Teaching Council*, has 'scoped' Australian theological education. This paper draws on the relevant Reports of each.

1. The Australian Theology Sector

Mid-19th to mid-20th Century

Theological education in Australia began in the mid-1800s: Roman Catholic from 1834, Church of England (now Anglican) 1853, Presbyterian 1866 etc., the period when universities were founded, with 'divinity' excluded: Sydney (1850), Melbourne (1853), Adelaide (1874). Church-sponsored residential colleges allowed students to 'read' theology with a tutor, following Oxbridge practice – Trinity (1872 in Melbourne) and St Andrew's (1867 in Sydney). But 'Divinity' continued to be excluded, given the prevailing secular rationalism in academic life, and sectarian competition among the churches. The Church of England established the *Australian College of Theology* (ACTh) in 1891, as a 'national' body to provide examinations for undergraduate, graduate and research awards. By 1900 there were Seventh-Day Adventist, Baptist, Lutheran and Salvation Army colleges, and Roman Catholic training institutions for religious orders. The 1910 *Melbourne College of Divinity* (MCD) Act of Parliament setting up the MCD was in large part a response to this situation. By 1914 some 30 theological institutions enrolled a thousand students; the six universities had a total enrolment of 3,300.

Theological education thus operated for over a century apart from the universities, in distinct streams:

- Roman Catholic seminaries educated priests.
- Roman Catholic training institutions prepared religious order novices, especially for teaching.
- Protestant churches sponsored colleges to prepare men for ministry, including pastoral formation and academic examination. Anglicans used ACTh examinations; other Protestants used MCD ones.
- A network of Bible colleges emerged after World War 1, linked to missionary and evangelical agencies, teaching internal awards and preparing academically-oriented students for MCD awards.

The long-standing divisions between churches, and the ‘tyranny of distance’, saw colleges operating independently, with few faculty, curricula shaped by ordination requirements and assessed by external examinations, and limited research activity.

1960 – 1990 Co-operation, Accreditation and Consortia

The ACTh and MCD sustained friendly relations, and a 1965 conference began moves towards a first degree in Theology. The *Australian & New Zealand Association of Theological Schools* (ANZATS) formed in 1968, and the *South Pacific Association of Bible Colleges* (SPABC) in 1969.

Change began in the 1960s, following the Martin Report (1964), and State governments legislated to regulate degrees from non-university bodies. The *MCD Act* was revised in 1972 to provide for a taught Bachelor of Theology, and allow Roman Catholic participation; the ACTh was authorised by the NSW Minister of Education to offer a BTheol from 1975. State-based ecumenical consortia, some with university links emerged alongside the ACTh and MCD:

- The **Adelaide College of Divinity** (1979 – Anglican, RC, UCA) linked with Flinders University;
- The **Brisbane College of Theology** (1983 – Anglican, RC, UCA) linked with Griffith University for some years;
- The **Sydney College of Divinity** (1983) has had Member Institutions from the Australian Christian Churches (formerly Assemblies of God), Brethren, Churches of Christ, Greek Orthodox, Nazarene, Roman Catholic, Salvation Army and Uniting colleges at various times;
- **Murdoch University** opened a Theology Programme with the Perth College of Divinity (PCD 1985 – Anglican, RC, UCA).

Charles Sturt University (CSU) offered Theology from 1997 at St Mark’s National Theological Centre (Anglican, ACT). From 2007 the United Theological College (UCA) became a CSU campus in Sydney.

By the mid-80s less than a quarter of theological students were studying towards professional ministry, and student bodies ranged from 18 to 80, with women and men in roughly equal numbers.

1990 – Present: New Colleges, New Approaches

New colleges opened with new relationships and educational goals. **Australian Catholic University** (1991) offers theology degrees as well as theology for other courses (‘service teaching’).

Three networks of **Pentecostal** colleges have emerged: Tabor (1979), Harvest (1985) and Alphacrucis (1993, SCD), as well as Christian Heritage College (1985). Each is entrepreneurial in outlook—between them teaching at some twenty campuses—and emphasises training for contemporary ministry, including counselling, visual arts and media. Tabor Adelaide looks to be ‘a multi-denominational Christian Education Centre offering government-accredited courses at tertiary level’. Its degrees include Counselling, Education and Humanities as well as Theology. Alphacrucis, with similar aspirations, teaches a BTheol in Korean as well as English.

This 'tertiary Christian education' model also typifies other theology HEPs. **Avondale College** (Seventh Day Adventist, 1897) offers theology to prepare pastors, alongside 'service teaching' for non-theology students, the vast majority. The **University of Notre Dame** (WA and NSW, Roman Catholic, 1990) is similar: with 7,000 students taking a theology 'core', it has the most theology EFSTL in Australia. The **Wesley Institute** (UCA, Sydney) specialises in performing and visual arts as well as pastoral ministry. **Campion College** (Roman Catholic, 2006) offers a 'liberal arts' BA requiring core units in history, literature, philosophy and theology.

Australian theological education today embraces some 14,000 students enrolled in 6,200 EFSTL:

<i>Institution:</i>	<i>Level:</i>	Under-graduate	PG C'work	Ministry Studies	HDR	Total	%age
Australian College of Theology		711.7	471.6	12.0	20.7	1,216.0	19.6
Melbourne College of Divinity		275.0	215.3	12.0	89.0	591.3	9.5
Sydney College of Divinity		926.0	355.5	2.5	9.6	1,293.6	20.8
Australian Catholic University <i>(largely 'service' teaching)</i>		473.8	158.0	2.0	38.0	671.8	10.8
University of Notre Dame <i>(largely 'service' teaching)</i>		557.5	42.5		3.3	603.3	9.7
Other Universities: Theology <i>(CSU, Flinders, Murdoch, Newcastle)</i>		196.6	64.3	18.8	57.0	336.6	5.4
Tabor (SA, Vic NSW, WA, Tas)		307.4	57.8	3.8		368.9	5.9
Moore Theological College		321.0	21.0		0.5	342.5	5.5
Other Theology HEPs <i>(ACD, Adel CMin, Avondale, BCT, Campion, Christian Heritage, Harvest Vic & WA, John-Paul 2, Perth Bible C, Wesley Inst, Worldview Centre)</i>		667.4	102.0	14.5	2.0	785.9	12.7
TOTAL		4,436.4	1,488.0	65.5	220.0	6,209.9	100.0

Table 1: Theology EFSTL 2007

Developing government relations

State accreditation is now universal across the tertiary theology sector, but national recognition is recent, since the main federal role is funding, unavailable to private HEPs. Theology at public universities attracts Commonwealth Supported Places, but covers just 5% of the sector. The MCD was listed in DETYA's Schedule 1 in 2000, received federal research funding from 2002, fostering a strong research culture across its colleges. The MCD was also listed in Table B of the *Higher Education Support Act* (2003), bringing the MCD Dean into contact with government personnel on a par with Vice-Chancellors. The formation of the *Council of Deans of Theology* in the mid-90s provided a base for relating to government: from 2009 it has opened itself to all theology HEPs and university departments.

The greatest change for theology in relation to the Australian Government was FEE-HELP (2005): apart from the indirect funding support (\$20 million loaned by 2006) wider relationships are affected:

- a) The National Protocols brought significant changes in governance and academic structures, especially for the consortia;
- b) Four theology HEPs have been audited by AUQA, and the SAHE Quality Assurance Branch audited Tabor Adelaide in June 2009. These audits have occasioned a higher awareness in the sector of the importance of continuous quality management.

- c) FEE-HELP reporting mechanisms have significantly improved colleges' enrolment and recording procedures, and college administrations and DEEWR staff have come to know one another.
- d) FEE-HELP shifted the perception of theology in higher education: HECS-ineligible courses are commonly regarded as 'not proper' by students, university staff and government personnel, whereas a FEE-HELP-eligible course is seen as 'normal'.

Other changes have included federal school chaplain subsidies, leading several colleges to offer training; Avondale, Notre Dame and Tabor have gained CSPs in the priority areas of teaching and nursing.

Today the Australian theology sector is theologically, educationally and structurally diverse, with student bodies less dominated by education for professional ministry, and functions within the framework of Australian higher education.

2. Spiritual safety and academic freedom

A distinctive factor in theological education is concern to educate the whole person, taking into account a student's beliefs, worldview and assumptions. As Christian institutions, colleges endeavour for a learning experience in which classroom, refectory, chapel and common room function as diverse contexts for communally-oriented education. Opportunities to practice such learning are also important: theological educators empathise with Marx's assertion that the point is not merely to study the world, but to change it. This perspective highlights the emphasis in theology on formative learning, integrating its academic, applied and experiential dimensions, at both personal and communal levels.

Academic freedom is a key issue for the integrity of any learning community, and every discipline approaches learning through particular commitments: academic freedom makes sense only within an explicit framework of 'givens'. Yet prejudice and ideology can play their part in any education, including theology: the long-standing anti-intellectual strand in Australian culture is reinforced when church members regard academic study as dangerous at best and corrupting at worst. When this is associated with a specific theological stance, students may look to study only at a college believed to represent that tradition. Faculty are familiar with the 'hair-trigger' issues in the tradition concerned, and seek to introduce them to students in such a way that personal, academic and ecclesial integrity are maintained.

Theological study goes to the heart of personal and communal identity, worldview and lifestyle: matters that seem trivial to scholars can cause serious stress for a student. Conversely, students are better placed to reflect critically on new ideas when they feel themselves to be free from identity pressures, and both supported and challenged as persons of reasoned faith. Learning is best fostered when trust, co-operation and mutuality typify the learning community, and where it can be acknowledged when generally-held opinion has become taken-for-granted ideology. A professional obligation rests on theology faculty to ensure that students are equipped to face issues with minds open to development and change, and that at the same time they are supported in the risky process of theological reflection, learning in an environment free from 'spiritual harassment' (a category of special relevance in the theology sector, recognised in the grievance policies of some colleges).

3. Factors affecting AUQA audits in the theology sector

These observations point up several factors which should be taken into account in an AUQA audit of a theology HEP. It would be wrong to suggest that theology HEPs have 'special consideration': few panel members thus far have had exposure to theological education, but this has not proved problematic.

Acknowledge one's own agenda

Many higher education institutions regard themselves as 'objective' and 'faith-free'. This claim is itself a faith-statement, however, disclosed when gender or socio-political assumptions are questioned, for example. Theology is a discipline whose Christian framework is explicit: and since this raises questions of fundamental identity and world-view, this ethos also means that disagreements about its content and

nature are likely to be sharp. Auditors should have this in mind when auditing any HEP, resisting the temptation to bring in their agendas, but it is particularly significant in the case of a theology HEP.

Take the heritage seriously, but test ideals

Auditors need to take time to appreciate the particular heritage in which a theology HEP stands – theological tradition, church and academic relationships.

Theological institutions, in contrast to their perceptions of most universities, see themselves as representing a tradition of learning that is communal, flexible and person-centred. These high ideals must be tested, for example by triangulation between students, faculty and leaders. Yet good practice in such an environment may lie outside Auditors' experience: for example, the low incidence of plagiarism in theological education could be misread as reflecting less than rigorous procedures, rather than as influenced by the nature of theology as encouraging integrity in learning.

Conversely, these high ideals may mean that a college is overly-idealistic, as seen in ineffective administration, unreality about the financial costs involved, and weak and fragile links between learning and governance. Checks should be made regarding the congruity of understanding between external stakeholders (e.g. bishops, synods, churches) and a college's resources, intended and typical graduate outcomes. Such scrutiny can only be effective and have an impact, however, where a sound grasp of its heritage and ecclesial relationships has been gained.

Enquire about relationships (and their absence)

The diversity within the theology sector is in large part due to long-standing histories and the tyranny of distance, as well as the result of church divisions and theological differences. Whatever its origins, this diversity has also seen a resulting fragmentation of resources. For consortia, the issue of how diverse colleges co-operate in a common learning process is a familiar dimension of their existence, and the MCD and ACTh were commended by AUQA for their effective work in this area. But such co-operation cannot be taken for granted, and should be explored by Auditors, especially when a stand-alone institution is being audited. Ask questions – including seemingly naïve ones – about the level of resource sharing between a college and other institutions (whatever their affiliations or theological stance). The dialogue generated may well open allow issues to be opened up which are internally 'undiscussable'.

The exploration of an institution's relationships with other theology HEPs and tertiary institutions should be a significant aspect of an AUQA audit. A college's perception of irreconcilable theological difference preventing educational co-operation can be greater than is the case: well-tuned Auditors can detect this – which brings us to the next point.

Explore the community context of learning

How does the *overall* curriculum integrate learning – the interactions between classroom, placements, library, chapel and spiritual practices, residential life (if applicable) etc.? Theological students enroll expecting their learning to display these characteristics, and these expectations should be tested, both with them, with faculty and with support staff (mentors, administrators, chaplains etc.).

Similarly, many faculty teach from a church-tested sense of a God-given calling to teach. This can tempt lecturers to form 'disciples' supporting one's particular beliefs, and/or to teach too many subjects as way of extending theological influence. Self-made overload can mean that lectures are unrevised, little review is made of outcomes, assessment methods or the use of technology and the like—and learning suffers. Auditors need to be alive to such possibilities.

Investigate research activity

The nexus between teaching and research is widely affirmed and long practiced in the theology sector. Yet multiple demands are made on faculty, typically formation time and church involvements alongside teaching and academic administration. These mean that faculty research is minimal, and/or that research and supervision go unseen in faculty workloads.

Competition for scarce resources when it comes to long-term library development may also undermine research objectives, as may a lack of research training for students. Especially where a theology HEP offers Higher Degrees by research, these issues should be explored by Auditors.

Consider the effect of theological commitments on learning

Each theological institution teaches from a position of commitment, both official and implicit. AUQA Auditors should not stand aside from assessing how a doctrinal basis, church confession or – more problematic – an unstated but presumed stance interacts with learning. It is not AUQA’s role to assess the validity of a theological stance, but that does not end the matter. As a HEP, the institution has been authorized to teach at tertiary level, and living out that recognition reflects on its integrity.

Auditors should explore with faculty and students how they experience the correlations between a theological stance and the learning process. Do students find themselves encouraged to consider wider perspectives, and believe that they can do so without sanctions? Are other viewpoints or faith-systems portrayed as ‘aunt Sallys’, or respectfully engaged? Do faculty think that unreasonable ‘peer pressure’ exists in the student body to conform to a particular viewpoint – and how do they respond if they find this is true? How unknown, liberating, problematic or ignored is the college’s official theological stance?

The interaction between enrolment procedures and theological stance is also involved. Any HEP is within its rights to exclude an applicant academically unqualified to enter, or who rejects its approach to learning. A theology HEP, however, can be tempted to adopt procedures whose effect is to screen out students who do not already agree in detail with its stance: Auditors should be sensitive to this possibility.

If Auditors believe that such issues need to be addressed, they must be prepared to explore them (through the Chair) with college leaders and sponsors. Misunderstandings can be corrected in such discussions: where concerns remain, leaders can be alerted to likely Recommendations in the Audit Report so that they do not come as a bolt from the blue, which fosters resistance rather than response.

* * *

A concluding note: AUQA Auditors from outside the theology sector have enjoyed their exposure to it, not least because it represents a tradition of higher learning than runs in centuries rather than tri-ennia.

Sources:

Neil Ormerod, ‘Academic Freedom in a Theological Context’ (Sydney: Australian College of Theology Occasional Paper No. 4, 2008).

Charles Sherlock, *Uncovering Theology: the Depth, Reach and Utility of Australian Theological Education* (ATF, 2009), with a full bibliography on Australian theological education.