

# Transforming Theology

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*Incorporating Student Experience and Transformative Learning into Curriculum Design and Planning of Undergraduate Theological Degrees.*

A National Research Project supported by the  
AUSTRALIAN LEARNING & TEACHING COUNCIL and the  
AUSTRALIAN & NEW ZEALAND COUNCIL OF DEANS OF THEOLOGY

## Transformation or Formation?

*what is the aim of your theological degree?*

There are currently over 60 teaching campuses delivering theological undergraduate degrees in Australia, comprising universities, independent theological colleges and multi-institutional consortia operating across state boundaries. Many of these bodies advertise their mission of transforming students through their theological education, with a common aspiration of the transformation of students in ways that will have a deep impact on the future: of the students, of the church, of the world.

*Training for transformation; Education > inspiration > transformation; Pathways to the future; Developing Christians of influence for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.* This is the language of transformative education; but a question arises as to how much the actual curriculum is geared to its attainment. A companion question also presents

itself: do our theological programs focus on transforming students into potential world-changers or do they emphasize the formation of students into a more or less pre-determined role needed for established ministries? This is a stark contrast, but it is not a question of which is right and which is wrong, since both approaches have self-evident legitimization. However, the recognition of which is primary as an educational *raison d'être* will inevitably influence our whole approach to curriculum design and delivery. The formation of a ministerial persona equipped for the guardianship of the gospel and the performance of service of ministry is clearly a primary reason for denominations to set up their colleges. The universities, of course, have a more wide-ranging educational agenda within a liberal arts ethos, but

still have an element of utilitarian conservatism within the minority discipline of theology. A commitment to open-ended student transformation is a risky venture, but it is the stuff of reformers throughout history: those who have challenged the *status quo* and ushered in the radical changes which have generated reform, revival and theological and ecclesiastical progress. So then, where do we place our emphasis: on transformation or formation? We probably need both, but can we deliver both? Are there ways in which we can strategically both preserve the historical integrity of the gospel and facilitate the individualism that undergirds radical transformation? This is a fundamental issue being addressed by the current research project being conducted by the Council of Deans of Theology.

## The Research Project



*Uncovering Theology: The Depth, Reach and Utility of Australian Theological Education* revealed many significant features of the Australian theological landscape, including the diversity in clientele, who bring a rich and varied life experience with them into their studies, and the common claim of

theological colleges to provide transformative, holistic and integrative learning experiences. During 2011-12, this project will investigate the extent to which the needs of the increasingly diverse clientele are met through the undergraduate theological curriculum and the extent to which transformative education assists in meeting these needs.

## The Research Activities

### 2010

- Literature Survey
- Historical Curriculum Analysis
- Student Survey
- Student Focus Groups

### 2011

- Campus Visits: May
- Student Surveys: May
- Faculty Surveys and Interviews: September-October
- Stakeholder Surveys and Interviews: September-October

### 2012

- National Workshop: April-May
- Publication of Findings: August

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*"The language of 'me' has disappeared from my vocabulary."*

*"Previously, I was telling God what to do in me; now, it is God telling me what he is doing in me."*

*"I am being changed not into a different person but into the person God wants me to be."*

## What the Students Have Said

- Theological education involves many unique personal challenges for students, which can even be damaging, so support systems need to be carefully managed and structures for hearing the voice of students need to be authentically developed.
  - The changing world of education needs to be considered, with traditional assumptions as to clientele, content, aspirations, modern pedagogy and associated assessment being constantly reviewed.
  - A constant refrain was the significance of the educational community in the theological process, with particular importance attached to the role and personal modelling of the lecturer in areas of personal growth and development. While the theological content of study provided the authoritative base for an emerging worldview and an enlarged understanding of the people in that world, it was the lecturers who provided the inspiration for the personal appropriation and activation of the theological principles so learned.
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## The Research Team

### Project Leader:

Professor **Paul Beirne** (Dean, MCD)

### Project Manager:

Dr **Les Ball** (former Dean, BCT)

### Team Members:

Revd Dr **Mark Harding** (Dean, ACT)

Dr **Neil Holm** (Director of Coursework, SCD)

Associate Professor **Robert McIver** (Head of the School of Ministry and Theology, Avondale)

Associate Professor **Gerard Moore** (CSU)

Professor **Neil Ormerod** (ACU)

## Contacts

- for general information about the Project
  - Project Leader: Professor Paul Beirne  
Melbourne College of Divinity  
21 Highbury Grove KEW VIC 3101  
Phone: (03) 9853 3177; Email: [admin@mcd.edu.au](mailto:admin@mcd.edu.au)
- for specific activities and participation in the Project
  - Project Manager: Dr Les Ball  
33 Cooradilla Street JINDALEE QLD 4074  
Phone: 0448 143 778; Email: [les.j.ball@gmail.com](mailto:les.j.ball@gmail.com)
- for queries about or issues arising from the conduct of the research
  - Human Research and Ethics Committee  
Melbourne College of Divinity  
21 Highbury Grove KEW VIC 3101  
Phone: (03) 9853 3177; Email: [admin@mcd.edu.au](mailto:admin@mcd.edu.au)
- Website: <http://web.me.com/anzcdt>



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*The views expressed in this newsletter do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.*