**Speculations on the Future of Australian Theological Education**

About the only thing that we can be certain of in these times of rapid change in higher education is that things will look very different in a few years’ time. This is even more so in Australia theological education, where the economic, political and regulatory environment is even more fluid than in the rest of the system. What I will attempt here, therefore, is some reflections and predictions on the Christian higher education landscape based on economic insights and my own experience of the sector over the last 25 years, drawing on the statistical portrait of the sector prepared as part of a project for the Council Deans of Theology <http://www.cdt.edu.au>. I should emphasise that these are my own views and not representative of any of my institutions I’m affiliated with.

Economic drivers of change include accreditation difficulties and rising accreditation costs, along with other compliance costs for institutions which don’t have the scale to spread them over sufficient students. There is a popular perception that online teaching is cheap. This may be so but only after a huge investment in high-quality systems and specialist personnel have been made, and these days students just won’t bother with institutions that are unable or unwilling to invest in providing rich interactive online learning experiences. Posting traditional lectures on an online platform and enabling a predictably underutilised discussion forum just doesn’t cut it anymore. Even with theology students who tend to be more content driven and loyal than those in other subjects.

These and other forces are driving consolidation in the sector. Australian theology has historical been dominated by denominational colleges outside our mainstream university system <https://theconversation.com/australian-universities-and-religion-tales-of-horror-and-hope-23245>. These consortia include Melbourne College of Divinity (now University of Divinity), the Australian College of Theology, and the Sydney College of Divinity. It is hard, however, to see that continuation of this duplication of consortia as sustainable or a wise use of the Church’s mission resources. Or much of a witness to Christian unity.

One possible future would be bringing together the colleges for accreditation and cooperation in a new consortium to take advantage of the greenfield provisions of the higher education act designed to facilitate new universities. Before there are squeals of outrage about the importance of theological differences between colleges, recognise that this future would allow the colleges to continue their distinctives. In fact, it would put diversity, especially that represented by smaller colleges, on a more sustainable footing. All this would mean is theological colleges from different traditions being willing to sit around a table for accreditation purposes. Though I acknowledge this represents a thin rather than a thick view of consortia, one that locates the distinctives in the colleges themselves.

However, with University of Divinity already having university status and the funding that goes with it, a more likely scenario is colleges gravitating from the other consortia to University of Divinity. Commonwealth supported places are not the only attraction here (and in fact a mixed blessing because with the small amount of funding now available in arts subjects goes adherence to the mandated high sticker price and considerable administrative burden). Greater attractiveness to overseas students, especially research students, and greater availability of research funding are probably stronger gravitational pulls.

It is hard to see Sydney College of Divinity surviving these forces, which are already killed several smaller consortia. The Australian College of Theology is much more interesting case, larger in fact than the University of Divinity, and with a proud evangelical ethos. Will it continue to be viable as a consortium alongside the University of Divinity? Will it differentiate itself by offering ministry support subjects alongside traditional theology offerings? It must be said too that there are some long-standing historical antipathies to be overcome in any coming together of the University of Divinity and the Australian College of Theology.

Consortia are not the only game in town though. Moore College recently gained university college status standing apart from the consortia (it was long ago associated with Australian College of Theology). Will it ever make the jump to university status? Sound finance and straightforward governance arrangements work in its favour, but small scale and a reluctance to play the secular research game count against it in the quest for university status. There are some other smaller colleges that stand apart from consortia but it more likely that they will move in the other direction to the unaccredited margins of the system.

A newer beast roaming the theological education landscape is the comprehensive college, integrating theology with studies in business, education, counselling, health sciences, and more. Examples include the Australian Catholic University and Notre Dame which were granted university status before the current regulatory regime commenced. They express an integrative vision in the Catholic tradition, representing the largest religious group in Australia by attendance according to National Church Life survey data <https://www.ncls.org.au/>. Avondale, associated with the Seventh Day Adventist Church, recently joined them as a university. Alphacrucis, associated with the Pentecostal movement which is now the second largest Australian religious movement by attendance, may join them as a university in the next few years.

A strange and currently threatened beast on the landscape is the denominational theological college adopted a secular university. Examples include the theological schools of Flinders, Murdoch and Charles Sturt universities, with only the last of these still surviving. Theology could go the way of the others at Charles Sturt now that the government funding per student that a university receives from adopting a theological college is less attractive (both the dollar amount for theology and the fact that places are capped for the university as a whole), and theology research not performing well at the last Australian Research Council Excellence in Research Australia assessment.

Theological research assessment in Australia is a fraught issue <https://anzats.edu.au/journal/back-issues/51-1/>. It will be interesting to see what happens with the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture in Canberra. Will it in end up finding a new home with the University of Divinity, giving the University of Divinity a Canberra base and a more national identity? Or end up with one of the other major players? It remains a place of huge potential for Christian engagement with Australian and political life.

The government’s view of all of this will be interesting, as there are obvious administrative and risk management advantages for the government in dealing with a smaller number of consortia and colleges. Would a Commonwealth Minister ever try to force the issue of consolidation, or offer funding and other inducements towards this end?

From a national point of view there would be advantages in stronger theological research that consolidation would bring. Our Christian school sector which educates around 40% of Australian students is at the moment poorly served by the education faculties secular universities. Research on educational leadership, development, curricula for senior school Christian studies courses, and what Christian identity means in a 21st century Australian school context is desperately needed.

Another desperate need is for research on the spiritual dimensions of mental health, tied up as they are to questions of meaning and purpose and community, and which Christian theology has 2000 years of rich reflection to draw on. Theology and other disciplines working together on these and other issues of national concern would be powerful, and I suggest helped by the theology sector pooling resources so as to be more visible and attractive research partner for Australian universities.

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(Besides my primary Alphacrucis affiliation, I also declare my association with the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture as an Honorary Professor, the Australian College of Theology as a member of their Academic Board, and with the University Divinity as a BD and DTheol graduate. I emphasise that these are my personal views and should not be attributed to any of the organisations named here).