

Macquarie Christian Studies Institute: An illuminating Australian experiment in integrative Christian higher education

International Journal of Christianity &

Education

2026, Vol. 0(0) 1–22

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DOI: 10.1177/20569971261420806

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Abstract

Macquarie Christian Studies Institute was an experiment in integrative Christian higher education that operated at Macquarie University in Sydney from 1999 to 2008. Its birth and demise sheds light on the meaning of the secular in Australian higher education, the relationship between theological education and universities in Australia, and the relationship of Australian churches to education. A key question is whether there is a viable business model for integrative Christian higher education in Australia. Examining the experience of Macquarie Christian Studies Institute is significant at this time of crisis in Australian theological education because other institutions are grappling with similar issues. This paper is a preliminary investigation that prepares the way for a future history of the Institute.

Keywords

higher education, theological education, Australia, finance, secular, integration

Introduction

Macquarie Christian Studies Institute (MCSI) operated at Macquarie University in Sydney from 1999 until it was wound up in 2008 for financial reasons.¹ It pioneered integrative

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Christian higher education in Australia, involving some of Australia's leading evangelical Christian educators including the founder Professor Stuart Piggan, inaugural director Professor Robert Banks, subsequent directors Dr Gordon Preece and Dr Greg Clarke, as well as Professor Edwin Judge, Professor Alanna Nobbs, and Professor Mark Hutchinson.

Why would Christian educators be interested in the history of a small, short-lived Australian institution? There are several reasons. First, little has been written about the tiny but growing Christian higher education sector in Australia (including such institutions as Avondale, Alphacrucis, Excelsia, and Christian Heritage College), in contrast to Australia's large Christian school sector, or North American Christian colleges and universities. Australian Christian higher education is interesting both in its own right and as a comparative case². Second, as an Australian pioneer of integrative Christian higher education MCSI is an illuminating window into the struggle over the meaning of the secular in Australian higher education, the relationship between theological education and universities in Australia, and the relationship of churches to higher education. Third, there are lessons for future Australian initiatives in integrative Christian higher education³. This is not an idle question as most institutions in the sector are struggling financially and in other ways at the moment.

Robert Banks lamented at a post-closure gathering of MCSI people in late 2008 at St Swithins Anglican Church in Pymble that the time and place was not right for MCSI to flourish, but predicted that others in more favourable contexts would pick up the vision of Australian integrative Christian higher education. One of these new ventures, Alphacrucis University College, is seeking full Australian university accreditation in the next few years (Austin 2023). Many of the key figures in MCSI are now involved with Alphacrucis. Stuart Piggan is a member of Alphacrucis Council. Mark Hutchinson as Alphacrucis Vice President of Development struggled with many of the same issues with Christian teacher training as did MCSI. Robert Banks and Edwin Judge are Alphacrucis Honorary Professors. Kara Martin, Conrad Hor-Kwong, Robyn Wrigley-Carr and others have taught with Alphacrucis. Tony Golsby-Smith was involved with the new Alphacrucis Business Faculty and led a strategic planning process at Alphacrucis. Other Australian integrative ventures like Tabor College in Adelaide, Excelsia College in Sydney and Christian Heritage College in Brisbane are seeking to follow a similar path to university status. Avondale has recently achieved university accreditation, but its aspirations seem limited to serving its small Adventist community in its rural location outside Sydney. We already have two Catholic universities, Australian Catholic University and University of Notre Dame Australia which are discussed further below.

This paper outlines the genesis and history of Macquarie Christian Studies Institute, formulates a series of questions raised by this history, and offers some tentative answers for testing in a planned full history of the Institute⁴.

The Australian higher education context and Australian secularism

To appreciate the significance of Macquarie Christian Studies Institute it is necessary to understand the historic separation between Australian universities and theological education⁵. When the first Australian universities were founded in the mid-19th century,

Britain was struggling with the place of different religious groups within its universities. The place of nonconformists and Roman Catholics at Oxford and Cambridge was a subject of acrimonious debate. So, when proposals for a university in Sydney were floated in the 1840s, the leading Anglican and Presbyterian laymen of the colony wanted to avoid the project being undermined by battles between the different religious groups over their place in the university, and in particular over religious instruction. Sectarian struggles were a particular issue in the colony because of its religious diversity. Presbyterians were influential (even claiming that they like the Church of England had a right to be considered an established church because of their status in Scotland). Roman Catholics were more numerous in the colony than England, with so many of the convicts being Irish Catholics. The result was that the University of Sydney in 1852 included the furtherance of religion among its objects but excluded theology from the curriculum, imposed no religious test on students, and kept the churches at a distance. Each of the major denominations was granted land to construct a residential college but students were not required to be associated with a college and the colleges had no meaningful teaching role⁶.

This approach at the University of Sydney was perfectly in keeping with the Australian understanding of the secular as nonsectarian Christianity⁷. Clerics with their tendency to grab power for their denominations were kept at a distance in order to advance a common Christianity that was seen as valuable to the colony. This was especially so in education. This pattern of exclusion of theology from Australian universities and keeping the churches and clerics at a distance was repeated as the number of universities grew. As the influence of the churches in society faded from the 1960s, the founders of newer universities gave little thought to theological instruction or a place for the churches. This was the case for Macquarie University, founded in 1964, where the Institute was located (Hutchinson and Mansfield 1992).

Theological education in Australia thus evolved separately from the universities, with the different denominations founding colleges to train their clergy⁸. Some of these colleges go back as far as the universities, for instance, Moore Theological College to 1856. While theological colleges were often located on or near university campuses there was seldom much interaction with universities – occasionally students taking theology courses alongside their university studies, or research links between theological college and university staff. Australian theological colleges receive no government funding, their staff are ineligible to apply for government research grants, and when government student loans were introduced theology students were initially ineligible.

Vision for Macquarie Christian Studies Institute

Macquarie Christian Studies Institute attempted to bridge this divide between theological education and universities. Whether it was the first to do so in Australia can be debated. Australian Catholic University was founded in 1991, a few years before the Institute, but it was a creation of a reforming Labor government determined to consolidate the many Catholic teaching and nursing colleges, and merging them into a public university was opposed by many Catholic bishops. It is telling that Australian Catholic University operated without a Faculty of Theology for many years, and its main Sydney campus until recently lacked a chapel. There was little attempt to integrate Catholic theology with other

courses that the university offered⁹. This perceived weakness of Catholic identity animated the rival conservative Catholic institution founded around the same time, the University of Notre Dame Australia, which despite the name had no formal connection to the US institution. We can effectively ignore the adoption of several theological colleges by Australian university arts faculties (including Flinders, Murdoch, and Charles Sturt Universities) in the 1990s as these adoptions were driven by a government policy change to fund universities on the basis of student load. These theological colleges operated largely as before. All these except the Charles Sturt University arrangement with the Anglican St Mark's College in Canberra have now collapsed after funding arrangements changed again. For our purposes, we can also ignore the granting of university status in 2012 to the Melbourne College of Divinity, now the University of Divinity, as it only taught theology and the change cut rather than enhanced connections between it and the secular University of Melbourne. Similarly, the Australian College of Theology which was granted university status in 2024 as the Australian University of Theology.

When MCSI was planned in the early 1990s there were some other small colleges that taught subjects besides theology: the Adventist College Avondale which had particular strength in medicine from its associated hospital, as well as education and mission studies; the Pentecostal Southern Cross College (later renamed Alphacrucis) which was experimenting with courses in leadership for pastors; Wesley Institute taught music and creative arts (later to become Excelsia College); Christian Heritage College began to train Christian teachers, and Tabor College. None had a comprehensive vision for integrating theology with their other disciplines.

The Macquarie Christian Studies Institute's vision was for high-quality integrative Christian higher education in partnership with a major Australian public university. One of the early planning documents stated the mission as follows: "To equip Christians to change our world God's way. Our aim is to equip people to influence the communities in which they live and work, through effective leadership and service. We believe that the Biblical renewal of thought, heart and will, in an environment shared with the experience of experts in various disciplines and professions, will equip people to transform their world." ("Mission Vision and Values," p. 4 of MCSI, 1999 Annual Report in Archives Box A. Note that references to box and folder numbers are to the MCSI archives described in the appendix.)

The Macquarie University context was important. It had an internationally recognised Department of Ancient History built by Professor Edwin Judge and many Christian colleagues working on first century history in non-confessional mode. As a new university Macquarie had many mature age students, often women, and the university sought to engage with the general community through its Ancient History Museum, Ancient Documentary Research Centre, and Society for the Study of Early Christianity. Another important Macquarie institution was Robert Menzies College (see [Paterson](#)), a residential College founded by evangelical Anglicans, which had been experimenting with lay theological education through its School of Christian Studies (SOCS) from 1983, and with research through its Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity (CSAC) established in 1992. Key figures in the founding of MCSI, Stuart Piggin, Mark Hutchinson, and Stuart Johnson were, respectively, Master of Robert Menzies College and Director of CSAC, and Director of SOCS¹⁰.

MCSI had multiple roots. It was nondenominational, but many of those involved were evangelical Anglicans. Since the 1960s, Australian evangelicals had been increasingly concerned to connect faith with work and other parts of life, expressed through organisations such as the Zadok Institute for Christianity and Society, and the Interchurch Trade and Industrial Mission (ITIM, later to become Reventure). These social concerns didn't make much impact on Australian theological colleges which remained focused on preparing ministers to staff their churches, especially in Sydney where Moore Theological College, which dominated evangelical theological education, maintained a laser-like focus on training preachers for parish ministry¹¹.

For many of the key figures behind Macquarie Christian Studies Institute, Regent College, founded in 1982 on the campus of University of British Columbia in Vancouver, was an important model. Regent eschewed training for ordained ministry, instead offering postgraduate degrees for laypeople who wanted to integrate their Christian faith with their work in business, teaching, the arts, or other areas¹².

Some Reformed Christians involved in the early discussions which led to Macquarie Christian Studies Institute wanted an Australian version of Abraham Kuyper's Free University of Amsterdam, though they never had the people or the money for such a grand project. There were also plans in the 1980s for a Queensland Christian University that got as far as a bill debated by the Queensland Parliament (see Archives Box 23), along with vaguer discussions in Sydney and Melbourne, but sufficient funds were never available for any of these Christian university dreams. Moreover, influential figures such as Edwin Judge and Peter Jensen in Sydney were sceptical about Christian universities on the grounds that Christians should be engaged with our public universities, the dangers of sectarianism, the difficulty of achieving scholarly excellence, and the huge cost of establishing Christian universities. These arguments about public universities and sectarianism were stronger in the broadly Christian university culture of the 1950s in which both Judge and Jensen were formed than in our current university environment of radical pluralism and widespread hostility to Christian scholarship. Christian engagement with our public universities and new Christian universities are not of course mutually exclusive. Edwin Judge's other concerns about the difficulties and cost of achieving scholarly excellence remain problems for prospective Christian universities¹³. It is important to recognise that MCSI was not a Christian university, nor did it aspire to develop into one, to the disappointment of some of the Reformed leaders involved in the early discussions. The MCSI vision was designed to minimise concerns Judge and Jensen expressed, and to be achievable with the available funds.

Foundation and brief history of Macquarie Christian Studies Institute

Ideas for an Institute for Christian Studies at Macquarie began to be discussed in the early 1990s by Stuart Piggin, Mark Hutchinson, Edwin Judge, and others. They were joined by leaders of Australian Christian schooling movements who were concerned about where the next generation of teachers for their growing schools would come from with university education faculties increasingly hostile to Christianity and churches not always supportive of aspiring teachers (Hastie 2023a provides background). In May 1996, the Board of

Robert Menzies College supported Stuart Piggin devoting significant time to developing a model for the Institute. A big step forward was a gathering to discuss the Institute on 16 July 1997 at Bishops court, the residence of the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney Harry Goodhew. This gathering was attended by many influential church and university figures, including the Vice Chancellor of Macquarie University Professor Di Yerbury. Design work then proceeded rapidly, including the formation of lean design teams and a significant weekend retreat at Avoca Beach in October 1997 led by the business strategy consultant Tony Golsby-Smith who had caught the vision for the Institute (the Avoca Beach documents and work of the design teams may be found in the Archives Box 1).

Macquarie Christian Studies Institute Ltd was registered as a company limited by guarantee in April 1998 (Archives Box 32). Geoff Kells, recently retired as Managing Director of the large Australian corporation CSR was recruited as Board Chair (he served from 1998 to 2004), followed by Peter Lees (2004–2008) also from the corporate world. Other directors had experience in business (for instance Adrian McComb, Tony Golsby-Smith, Ron Winestock, Ian Campbell, Catriona Corbett), journalism and human resources (Kara Martin), pastoral ministry (Roger Chilton, Stuart Johnson), Christian schooling (Jack Mechielsen, Bob Friskin), and higher education (Stuart Piggin).

A Memorandum of Understanding with Macquarie University (Archives Box A) was signed in November 1998. This document opened with a statement that is highly significant in the history of higher education in Australia: ‘MU welcomes MCSI as a voice of Christian perspectival studies in the field of tertiary education. MU respects the right of MCSI to hold its own perspectives as a Christian provider. MCSI welcomes the pluralist intellectual environment at MU and prefers to position its Christian perspectives within such an environment, rather than operate in an exclusively Christian environment’. In practice, this meant that units designed and offered by the Institute, endorsed by the Christian Studies Committee of the Academic Senate, could be credited towards Macquarie University undergraduate degrees. The idea was that Macquarie students studying education, business, or other degrees could take MCSI theology units plus integrative units in their areas of study as electives. They would receive mentoring from Christian professionals in their field who were associated with the Institute. Another important element of the agreement was the principle of equal treatment: ‘MU agrees to treat MCSI courses which it accredits just as it does its own courses, in terms of advertising and position in the MU Calendar. MU accepts that MCSI units should be perceived by students, as much as possible, as MU courses. MU agrees, in principle, to make its facilities available to MCSI students as readily as they are available to MU students. This is in line with the aim of MCSI to integrate its students into the life of MU as fully as possible’. This last sentence is remarkable in the history of Australian higher education, mandating equal treatment of confessional Christian studies within a major public university.

It was a brilliant design because MCSI students could combine the advantages of Macquarie’s degrees, academics, library resources, campus facilities, and accreditation, with the integrative Christian theological studies at the Institute. This meant that students did not have to make a terrible choice between the training in their disciplines at Australian universities which ignored or slighted Christian faith, and the under-resourced and perhaps sectarian training they might have received at the sort of Christian university that

was the alternative to Macquarie Christian Studies Institute. The under-resourced and sectarian nature of the Christian university that might have been created in the 1990s was inevitable from the historic separation in Australia between theological education and universities discussed earlier in the paper, as well as the exclusion of new private institutions from access to government funding. Large scale philanthropic funding of higher education was unknown in Australia at that time, though this has changed in more recent years. At Macquarie Christian Studies Institute, students could have both well-funded high-quality education and the Christian element.

For Macquarie University, the economics of the arrangement looked good, provided Macquarie could attract enough Christian students away from their competitors to counterbalance the loss of revenue from Institute electives students would take. The MOU with Macquarie University asked that a formal business proposal be provided to the university, setting out the economic and other benefits to Macquarie of the arrangement with MCSI. A 38-page Business Plan was prepared, replete with the jargon of environmental analysis, competitive advantage, SWOT analysis, including marketing, HR, financial, and innovation plans (Archives Box B).

Besides securing the agreement with the university the other critical issue for the Institute was funding. The Vincent Fairfax Foundation provided seed funding alongside a number of donors from the Christian business world¹⁴. Though modest in scale, this gave the Institute a start and allowed the initial staff to be hired and on-campus office space to be rented. Funders from the business world hoped that student fees would quickly support the institution, perhaps a realistic expectation in their business world but pretty rare in Christian higher education worldwide and perhaps an unrealistic expectation. The MCSI academic leadership, however, hoped that the startup funding would continue. There was little prospect at the time of Australian government funding for any institution except a public university.

Professor Robert Banks, an eminent Australian theologian, left his position as Professor of Lay Ministry and Director of the De Pree Leadership Center at Fuller Seminary in Los Angeles to become Director of the Institute in 1999 (see [Treloar \(2024\)](#)). The MCSI vision intersected with his own thinking over several decades about the need to change theological education to equip the laity for mission in the contemporary world. This was evident in his letter explaining his decision to resign his Anglican orders ([Banks, 1966](#)), as well as in his academic work (including his Cambridge PhD thesis, [Banks, 1975](#)), writing on house churches ([Banks, 1979](#); [Banks and Banks, 1989](#)), and theology of everyday life ([Banks, 1987](#)), his 1989 Fuller inaugural address (published as [Banks, 2006](#)), and his book on theological education that was published just as he commenced at the Institute ([Banks, 1999](#), with MCSI discussed as a 'new model of missional theological education' at pages 260–61). For a couple of years promoters of the Institute had been talking with Robert Banks and his wife Julia about the possibility of returning from the US to lead it. A sadness associated with his taking up the role was the death of Julia from cancer, as she as much as Robert had come to share the MCSI vision. Alongside Robert Banks, his student Simon Holt was hired (Academic Director, 1999–2000), and other academic staff over the next few years included Julian Jenkins (Academic Director, 2001–2003), Neil Holm (Dean and Lecturer in Education, 2003–2008), Brian Rosner (Faculty, 2001–2003), Armen Gakavian (Faculty, 2004–2008), Bill Dumbrell (Sessional Faculty), Geoff Broughton (Sessional

Faculty), Kara Martin (Sessional Faculty), John Dickson (Sessional Faculty), Geoff Treloar (Sessional Faculty), Robyn Wrigley-Carr (Sessional Faculty), and Conrad Hor-Kwong (Sessional Faculty). Non-academic staff were crucial to the work of the Institute, and included Adrian McComb (Development Director, 1999–2008), Brenda Holt (Student Services, 2000), Diane Hockridge (Student Services, 2000–2008), Nadja Leffler (Public Relations Manager, 2003–2007), and Jan McEvoy (Office Manager, 1999–2008). This is an incomplete list, and does not include interns and other volunteers.

The first MCSI unit, *Spirituality and Everyday Life*, was taught by Robert Banks and Simon Holt in Winter School July 1999. Regular undergraduate units in theology and other fields began in first semester February 2000. These included *Foundations of a Christian Worldview*, taught by Mark Hutchinson; *Christian Spirituality*, Stuart Piggin; *Sex Money and Friendship*, Kara Martin/Brian Rosner; *Popular Culture*, Geoff Broughton; *Bible Survey: Genesis to Revelation*, *Jesus: Person Politics and Ethics*, *Paul: Person Politics and Ethics*, *Seeking the Good Society: Conversations on Justice, Freedom and Order*, *World Religions Science and Christianity*, *Economics and Theology*, *Spirituality and Work*, *Bridging Faith and Work*, Robert Banks/Tony Golsby-Smith; *Integrity in Business: Christian Perspectives on Counselling*, Bill Anderson; *Towards a Christian Theory of Education*, Richard Edlin; *Curriculum Pedagogy and Worldview*, *Teaching in Community*, Neil Holm. This is a non-exhaustive list of units and personnel varied from year to year¹⁵.

Student numbers were below expectations, with the lack of trainee teachers particularly worrying. Initial discussions with the leaders of the Christian schooling movements had suggested that large numbers of teachers training for their schools would come to Macquarie and take MCSI courses. The paragraph from the Business Plan about teacher education student projections is worth quoting: 'At present, CCHE [the teacher training arm of Christian Parent Controlled Schools, one of the two main associations of Christian schools in Australia] teaches some 60 students, largely in their graduate programs. It is felt that there is a total new teacher intake into the Christian schools movement of around 200 teachers per year, and into the new Anglican schools movement of an additional 20 teachers per year...It should be, at a conservative guess, possible for CCHE to begin training (with high quality matriculants) with at least 15% of the market, or some 30 students in preservice training in the first year. Combining free market approaches with direct links into schools, directed in-course acculturation to the needs of Christian schools, and scholarships linking training to employment possibilities, such that the Macquarie product proves itself in the market over a three-year period, this intake should double in three years to 60. So after three years there would be a total of 120 pre-service education students at various stages of their training. Assuming growth at the rate which Christian schools are growing currently (10% per year), 132 additional preservice students could safely be expected by 2001 if the program began in 1998. Quite apart from short courses, graduate courses, conferences, in service or other courses, then, an undergraduate student base for the Institute of 500 after five years should be achievable, with proper marketing and sensible attention to the needs of the evangelical constituency' (Archives Box 22). These numbers of student teachers never eventuated, and enrolment in MCSI's first year was two students. Various organisations such as the National Institute of Christian Education (NICE) which grew out of CCHE led by Richard Edlin, Southland College led by

Ted Boyce, and the Anglican Schools Commission in conjunction with Moore College attempted to do similar things to MCSI in teacher training and absorbed many potential MCSI students. The politics of Christian schooling in Australia remain complex, with competing peak organisations and training bodies. A lot of money and many careers in these organisations were at stake in MCSI's attempt to reconfigure Christian teacher training. Public universities also of course had their own financial stake in teacher training and thus little appetite for MCSI to succeed.

The failure to attract significant numbers of teacher education students was compounded by fewer than expected Macquarie undergraduates taking MCSI units as electives. Many students were deterred by having to pay upfront fees for MCSI units whereas other Macquarie University electives could be financed through government income contingent loans¹⁶. This was not an issue for international students who paid upfront fees for both MCSI and Macquarie University units, and there was a small but steady stream of international students, some of whom were on study-abroad programs from American Christian colleges.

Understandably the low student numbers concerned the Board. There is an interesting 2002 document (Archives Box A) produced by a group within the Board with business experience known as the 'boat group' because they met on Ron Winestock's boat; other key members were Tony Golsby-Smith and Stuart Johnson. They called for greater focus in MCSI's subject offerings, reduction of academic staff costs, more practitioner involvement, and an end to distracting side-projects. Adrian McComb, the MCSI staff member with most business experience had been concerned all along about the shakiness of student number projections and the viability of courses that did not lead clearly to paid employment, whether that be in church ministry, Christian schools, or Christian NFPs. These concerns were expressed most clearly in a 1998 report Adrian wrote after a trip to North America to study the economic models of Christian colleges and talk with their leaders (Archives Box C, with related correspondence).

Robert Banks, who had now remarried Linda Hope, retired at the end of 2003. His student and friend Rev Dr Gordon Preece was appointed to succeed him, commencing as Director in early 2004. The range of courses grew, there were tentative moves towards distance and online learning, postgraduate units were offered for the first time, and many public lectures and conferences were organised. Accreditation was granted to the Institute in 2004 by the Australian College of Theology, a consortium of church-run theological institutions, and this allowed the Institute to offer a full degree program – a Bachelor of Christian Studies – and later a Master of Arts in Christian Studies (Archives Box A). Student numbers, however, remained lower than expected, and the philanthropic foundations and individual donors who had given generously to get the Institute off the ground were reluctant to keep giving at the same level, perhaps reasonably expecting that MCSI would become financially self-sustaining. Australia has nothing like the North American tradition of educational philanthropy.

In 2005, the Centre for Christian Thought and Experience (CCTE) was founded by Stuart Piggan within the Department of Ancient History at Macquarie University as a vehicle for PhD supervision and research. Since MCSI was not accredited or funded for either PhD supervision or research this initiative made sense to take advantage of Government funding Macquarie University received for PhD completions and research

publications. The Centre for Christian Thought and Experience was assisted by a grant from the Vincent Fairfax Foundation and private donors. It ran a vibrant seminar program and supervised a large number of PhD students until Stuart's retirement from the University led to the closure of the Centre in 2016.

Gordon Preece, who was commuting from Melbourne as well as dealing with family health complications, could not continue as Director. Dr Greg Clarke, an English literature scholar, previously associated with New College at the University of New South Wales and with stronger Sydney Anglican connections than Robert Banks or Gordon Preece, commenced as Director in 2007. A significant change at Macquarie was the retirement in 2005 of the Macquarie Vice Chancellor Di Yerbury with whom the Institute's MOU had been negotiated, replaced by Stephen Schwartz. In 2008, a decision was made to remove the Institute's units from the Macquarie University's supplementary schedule of units and University Handbook, which greatly reduced their visibility to prospective students. The decision was made without consultation, and represented an abandonment of the MOU by Macquarie University. Greg Clarke, Edwin Judge and others wrote to the Vice-Chancellor, to no avail. Student numbers fell from the tenuous 24 (full time equivalent) in Semester 2 2007 to the clearly unsustainable six in Semester 1 2008. Greg Clarke attempted to mitigate this by investigating arrangements with other universities and was also able at short notice to raise \$100,000 in funding commitments to sustain operations for the year. However, the combination of uncertain outlook for student numbers after the Macquarie University decision and lack of long-term funding meant that the Board of Directors decided to cease operations at the end of the 2008 academic year. Staff were laid off and students completed their degrees elsewhere, including at Robert Menzies College's School of Christian Studies. The remaining assets including the library were dispersed and eventually the MCSI company registration lapsed.

Legacy

Though it failed financially after less than 10 years of operations, Macquarie Christian Studies Institute left a significant legacy:

- Over 1400 units taken by students. Student testimonies collected in [Hockridge \(2009\)](#) as MCSI was closing are evidence of the life-changing impact of MCSI courses. A student wrote: 'I very easily forget how privileged I am to have had MCSI as such an integral part of my uni experience and my life'. Another wrote 'I immensely enjoyed the innovative opportunity to explore the interaction of faith and life as part of my degree. Studying and working at MCSI was a rewarding experience which enriched my university experience in ways that continue to shape my thinking, life and spirituality'.
- Pedagogical innovation, including learning communities, integration of theology with other disciplines, mentoring, practical experience for education students in Christian schools, and thinking about formation for distance and online students. [Di Hockridge's \(2021\)](#) work on formation and pastoral care in online education was shaped by her MCSI experience and has been important for other theological

educators in Australia. [Martin \(2017, 2018\)](#) is a good example of writing on the integration of faith and work, by an author shaped by MCSI.

- Over 50 academic staff and sessionals shaped by the experience of Macquarie Christian Studies Institute went on to do great things elsewhere. Robert Banks reflected with pleasure on his time with MCSI, describing it as ‘the fulfilment of my public working life’ and identifying mentoring as a key part of this. Several now-established academics reflected on how MCSI shaped their approach to integrative Christian education, and the inspiration of working with people like Stuart Piggin, Robert Banks, Gordon Preece, Neil Holm, Greg Clarke, and others. [Hockridge \(2009\)](#) includes some moving staff testimonies about the impact of MCSI on their development as Christian academics and leaders.
- Design thinking in higher education pioneered at MCSI by Tony Golsby-Smith and his ‘lean design teams’ was subsequently used by other Christian higher education institutions in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada ([Golsby-Smith, 2007](#)).
- Reform of regulatory and funding arrangements for private higher education. The MCSI experiment exposed problems with government policy towards private higher education, and was a catalyst for change. While he was at MCSI Adrian McComb founded the Council of Private Higher Education (COPHE), now known as Independent Higher Education Australia (IHEA), which worked to gain access to government FEE-HELP loans for students at private institutions, access to Commonwealth supported places for some private provider courses, access for private providers to the main source of prospective student information, the university-owned UAC Handbook, and tax deductibility of donations to private higher education. However, despite the work of Adrian McComb and others, much remains to be done to achieve competitive neutrality between public and independent higher education institutions in Australia ([Oslington, 2019a](#)).

Questions

Telling the story of Macquarie Christian Studies Institute, even in this highly abridged manner, raises certain questions. The purpose of this section is to make explicit a few important questions about the Institute and suggest some tentative answers. They are offered for consideration by a future history of the Institute which will draw on the archival material assembled and explored in this project.

(1) Why did MCSI fail financially?

Various explanations have been offered by participants for the financial struggles and eventual closure of MCSI in 2008¹⁷. For some participants, all was going well until Stephen Schwartz reneged on the MOU and effectively killed the Institute. We should not jump to the conclusion that this was Christian persecution, and several participants tell of the new Vice Chancellor and his deputy Judyth Sachs rationalising the university’s associated bodies, or as one participant put it ‘MCSI was just a fly on Stephen Schwartz’ windscreen’. The antipathy that developed between Schwartz and his predecessor Di Yerbury with whom the MOU had been negotiated may have played a part in the decision.

However, focusing on Stephen Schwartz underplays the serious student recruitment and financial problems that MCSI was having well before the new Vice Chancellor arrived. It is tempting for those who were heavily involved in MCSI to attribute the failure to external forces. The financial problems were longstanding and discussed extensively at board meetings, among supporters, and absorbed the energy of each of the Directors. Alongside the joys of leading the Institute, the Directors spoke of disappointments with student numbers, the complex politics of Christian schooling in Australia which meant that MCSI never really cracked the Christian teacher training market, frustrations with government policy settings that forced students to pay full fees for MCSI electives, and the difficulty of recruiting long-term donors. Amidst the financial disappointments there were wonderful examples of what the Directors saw as Divine provision – such as a donor who after a meeting unexpectedly wrote a cheque for the exact amount of the Institute’s just-budgeted shortfall for the year.

A lamentable tendency among church leaders is undermining ventures that the leader does not control. Recall the first Australian Anglican Bishop Broughton’s opposition to the ‘godless’ University of Sydney when it was clear that it would not be controlled by the Anglican Church (Kaye, 2020). Something of this tendency contributed to MCSI’s problems – it was seen by some Sydney Anglicans as unwelcome competition for Moore Theological College and there is anecdotal evidence of potential students being warned off involvement with MCSI by Sydney Anglican clergy and leaders of campus student groups. It probably didn’t help that two of the key figures in MCSI, Stuart Piggin and Robert Banks, had difficult histories with the Sydney Anglican leadership, Stuart over his support of the ordination of women, and Robert for resigning his Anglican orders as incompatible with his reading of the New Testament after being supported as a promising Moore College man to go to Cambridge for a PhD.

Church leaders are not the only ones with such unfortunate vices. Academics can stubbornly teach what they are interested in rather than what there is a market for; a vice that can be indulged without serious consequences in the financial comfort of a large public university, but not at a new venture like MCSI. One business-oriented participant described a vigorous disagreement with an MCSI academic over whether there was student demand for what they planned to teach, and whether this mattered, a disagreement from which their relationship never recovered.

Such lamentable tendencies may have contributed to the financial difficulties, but the fundamental question here is whether MCSI ever had a viable business model. Was MCSI’s assessment of the market for integrative higher education thorough and realistic? For instance, did the long-term revenue projections take account of the likely exhaustion of the limited stock of potential students for integrated Christian higher education in Australia? Was there too much emphasis on winning over Sydney Anglicans and other evangelical groups, rather than looking to the rapidly growing Australian Pentecostal churches as a potential market? Was enough planning and lobbying work done on government funding arrangements, including the crucial matter of MCSI student access to government income contingent loans? The teacher training market was critical to MCSI given that around 40% of Australian school students attend non-government schools, but was there sufficient appreciation of the political and relational complexities of tapping this market? Could a better arrangement have been made with Macquarie University to share

in the profits from PhD students attracted to Macquarie by MCSI and supervised by MCSI faculty? What planning and networking with overseas institutions was done towards tapping the potentially lucrative overseas student market, especially the Asian Christian higher education market where there were few competitors? Was there too much optimism about seed funding from foundations and donors continuing forever? Many potential roads to financial viability for MCSI were either not taken or found to be blocked.

- (2) Are there viable financial models for integrative Christian higher education in Australia?

The MCSI experience highlights the limited market for theological training in Australia that does not lead to an obvious job with a church or church-related organisation¹⁸. This is consistent with the experience of smaller ventures in faith and work training at various Australian theological colleges, such as the short-lived Marketplace Institute at Ridley College in Melbourne. Even Regent College in Vancouver has struggled with financial viability, despite its international standing, proximity to the much larger North American student market, as well as having a significant proportion of its costs covered by long-term donors rather than tuition fees.

The evidence seems to point to financial viability of integrative Christian higher education in Australia depending on serving clear markets, such as providing teachers and leaders for Christian schools, frontline staff and leaders for Christian social service organisations, aged care institutions, hospitals, alongside the traditional market for church pastors. The demand for pastors is softening in the mainline churches, though remaining somewhat stronger in the growing Pentecostal movement and some parts of the Evangelical and Roman Catholic churches¹⁹. By contrast, the Australian Christian schooling and not-for-profit sectors continue to grow yet find it increasingly difficult to recruit enough suitably qualified and well-formed Christian staff, especially leaders. So, it is not hard to see where Christian higher education institutions must focus to be viable in the future.

Another important factor in financial viability is government funding arrangements. Future directions in government policy are hard to predict but if Australian government support of theological education is ever expanded it is most likely to be to supply the staffing needs of Christian schools, hospitals and other not-for-profit organisations that generate clearly identifiable outcomes of interest to governments. However, policy changes that make employing Christian staff in these organisations could complicate matters and reduce the government's willingness to fund training staff in Christian higher education institutions. Persuading governments of the social capital and other benefits of supporting the training of pastors is hard. The long-standing Australian secular resistance to funding denominational theological colleges also makes the expansion of funding to support the sorts of vocational training provided by integrative Christian higher education institutions much more likely. So, both market demand and government funding are likely to be more favourable to future ventures in integrative Christian higher education like MCSI than the training of church pastors.

- (3) Does committed Christian scholarship have a place in Australia's universities?

This is a hard question. MCSI's teaching and research was explicitly Christian and even though nondenominational it represented a much deeper challenge to contemporary Australian secular universities than religious studies departments, or indeed than the Ancient History Department at Macquarie which studied first century Christianity non-confessionally.

Nevertheless, MCSI found a mostly respected place at Macquarie University through a unique set of personal relationships and institutions at Macquarie in the 1990s. Personal relationships were also important to the foundation of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture at Charles Sturt University in Canberra in the late 1990s. As MCSI discovered, and the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture is discovering at the moment, any arrangement dependent on particular personal relationships is vulnerable as people retire or move on to other positions.

It is hard to see signs of hope for other institutional expressions of committed Christian scholarship within Australia's public universities. Individual Christian academics of course continue to undertake such scholarship to the extent that their particular situations allow.

This reinforces the importance of new integrative Christian higher education institutions picking up the legacy of MCSI and dealing more successfully with the financial, regulatory, and other issues it faced.

(4) Can Australian theological colleges serve our future missional needs?

Like Robert Banks, [Bruce Kaye \(1997: 203\)](#) saw the problem many years ago: 'the way in which we construct the theological curriculum is no longer appropriate to the circumstances in which we find ourselves. I want to argue that the theological curriculum has been narrowed in the last one hundred and fifty years in a way which might have once suited a Christendom situation, but which, in the post Christendom situation of a plural society such as Australia, is no longer helpful or even faithful to our Christian tradition'.

More recently [Roy Williams \(2015\)](#) has argued that that the capacity of our Christian schools and not-for-profit organisations to maintain a healthy Christian identity and mission is crucial for the future of Christianity in Australia. He observes that these days many more Australians come into contact with such organisations than will go near a local congregation, and that this is likely to be even more so in the future. But are our theological colleges equipped to train the Christian teachers, chaplains, principals, and not-for-profit leaders to serve this missional need?

Our public universities cannot meet the needs of our Christian schooling and not-for-profit sectors because they lack theological expertise ([Oslington, 2019b, 2022](#)) and their culture is increasingly hostile to Christian organisations. Our theological colleges are similarly incapable of meeting this need because they lack expertise in education, business, and leadership, let alone the integrative skills to connect them with theology. This is not just an Australian problem (see for instance [Shaw, 2014](#); or [P. Williams, 2020](#)).

Ventures like MCSI integrating Christian faith with other fields such as education, business and leadership are therefore vital for the future of Christian mission in Australia. Such ventures can have a large exemplary influence even if they remain small.

(5) How will Australian churches relate to higher education in the future?

The churches in Australia have always had an uneasy relationship with higher education, excluded from Australia's early universities and forced to establish their own colleges to train clergy. Yet as long as Christianity remained culturally ascendant a generic Christianity underpinned our universities (though in the view of many Catholics it was really a generic Protestant Christianity). This Christian cultural ascendancy is long-gone and we now have radical pluralism in our universities, accompanied by ignorance and sometimes hostility towards Christian faith. The place of the churches in Australian higher education is very much an open question.

Conclusions

The issues raised by MCSI are important for the future of Christian mission and higher education in Australia, and MCSI's experience offers unique insights into the problems faced by new ventures in integrative Christian higher education. Probably the main lesson from the MCSI experience is the difficulty of creating a Christian university in Australia, with the most pressing difficulty being funding. Mission and funding are of course intimately related²⁰. It is hard to see sufficient funding coming from tuition revenue, even if the business models of new ventures are better than those of MCSI, so significant long term philanthropic funding is needed, which requires change in Christian and philanthropic culture in Australia. This won't happen by itself, and new ventures must find ways of catalysing change. Even with secure funding, building an integrative scholarly culture and research excellence is a long and fraught process.

This project hopefully prepares the way for a full history of MCSI both by highlighting issues and indicating how the archival and other material assembled about the MCSI experience might be used to address them.

Acknowledgments

This research was made possible by a grant from the Australian Research Theology Foundation. We thank Moore Theological College Library for housing the Macquarie Christian Studies Institute archives and for the generous assistance we received from librarian Erin Mollenhauer, and helpful comments from seminar participants at Alphacrucis, the Evangelical History Association annual conference and the Heretics Club. We appreciate the strong support of those associated with Macquarie Christian Studies Institute, many of whom have shared their experiences and donated material to the archives. Part of the motivation for the project is to honour their vision. Paul Oslington's only direct involvement with Macquarie Christian Studies Institute was through teaching a week-long unit on Christianity and economics in 2003, supported by a John Templeton Foundation grant. Incidentally University of NSW, where he was Associate Professor of Economics at the time, would not allow him to continue teaching the unit as it contravened their policy prohibiting teaching for competitors. It was both gratifying and hilarious for the Institute to be regarded as a competitor by this major Australian university. Luke Powell and Craig Hall worked as research assistants on the project, contributed ideas, and commented on the draft paper. Neither had any previous involvement with Macquarie Christian Studies Institute.

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Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Australian Research Theology Foundation.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. This research was made possible by a grant from the Australian Research Theology Foundation. We thank Moore Theological College Library for housing the Macquarie Christian Studies Institute archives and for the generous assistance we received from librarian Erin Mollenhauer, and helpful comments from seminar participants at AlphaCrucis, the Evangelical History Association annual conference, and the Heretics Club. We appreciate the strong support of those associated with Macquarie Christian Studies Institute, many of whom have shared their experiences and donated material to the archives. Part of the motivation for the project is to honour their vision. Paul Oslington's only direct involvement with Macquarie Christian Studies Institute was through teaching a week-long unit on Christianity and economics in 2003, supported by a John Templeton Foundation grant. Incidentally University of NSW, where he was Associate Professor of Economics at the time, would not allow him to continue teaching the unit as it contravened their policy prohibiting teaching for competitors. It was both gratifying and hilarious for the Institute to be regarded as a competitor by this major Australian university. Luke Powell and Craig Hall worked as research assistants on the project, contributed ideas, and commented on the draft paper. Neither had any previous involvement with Macquarie Christian Studies Institute.
2. Christian higher education is surveyed by [Yong \(2013, 2023\)](#), [Carpenter et al. \(2014\)](#), and [Glanzer \(2023\)](#), with discussion of Australian developments in [Glanzer \(2024\)](#). The larger context of global evangelicalism is described in [Hutchinson and Wolffe \(2012\)](#). Other discussions of recent developments in Australian Christian higher education include [Hutchinson \(2016\)](#) and [Oslington \(2014, 2021\)](#).
3. Integrative means that other disciplines such as business and education are integrated with theology. It is recognized that these other disciplines have their own methods appropriate to their subject matter and are distinct from theology, but claims to independence from theology are rejected. Christian theology has a unique authority flowing from divine revelation, but it is an authority that must be rightly exercised and that encourages rather than making redundant the detailed theoretical and empirical investigations of other disciplines does not do away with. This understanding of integration has much in common with Reformed approaches, though is uneasy with the Reformed tendency to underplay the methodological and subject matter autonomy of other disciplines and allow theology to short cut their detailed investigations. The MCSI approach to integration owes most to Regent College Vancouver.
4. The paper is part of a project exploring Macquarie Christian Studies Institute and its significance for Christian Higher education in Australia and beyond. It provides a basis for a future full

history of Macquarie Christian Studies Institute, for which we are seeking funding to commission a young historian not connected with the Institute. Such a full history would utilize the archival materials assembled and surveyed in this preliminary project plus our oral history interviews with the major players.

5. Histories of higher education in Australia include Forsyth (2014) and Pietsch (2020), though neither is attentive to theological education.
6. The early history of the University of Sydney is described by Kaye (2020). Forsyth (2014) and Davis (2017) are broader discussions of Australian universities but neither pays much attention to their religious dimensions.
7. Australian secularism is discussed by Chavura et al. (2019). Hastie (2023b) reinforces this account of Australian secularism as non-sectarianism in school education. Piggin and Linder (2018, 2019) and Chilton (2020) discuss the evangelical background. Edwin Judge's (2014, 2023) pioneered this approach.
8. Discussions of the history of Australian theological education include Treloar (1997, 2009, 2023, 2024), Piggin (1996, 1997, 2025), Breward (1997), Charles Sherlock (2009), Peter Sherlock (2016), Oslington (2014), and Oslington et al. (2019).
9. Views of Australian Catholic University vary from the skepticism about its claim to be either Catholic or a proper university by the prominent Catholic educator John Hill (1991) to the more positive account of a former Vice Chancellor Greg Craven (2008), under whose leadership it became the largest Catholic University in the English-speaking world.
10. The Sydney sister institution of Robert Menzies College, New College at the University of New South Wales, was also experimenting with models of Christian scholarship on a public university campus. Its Institute for Values Research was established in 1987, later reorganized into the Centre for Christian Apologetics, Scholarship, and Education (CASE) which continues to publish a magazine, and run events including the annual New College lectures (Cairney, 2011: 18).
11. Moore College had a brief and unsuccessful foray into teacher training in the 1990s, and some more recent modest initiatives in leadership and management training for ordinands. Jensen (2012) is a fair-minded insider account of the strengths and peculiarities of Sydney Anglicans.
12. Regent College is discussed by Cotherman (2020). The ambition of MCSI was to have a place within the structure of a public university offering accredited courses, which was a key element of founder James Houston's vision for Regent College. However, MCSI ended up becoming more and more marginal to Macquarie University, akin to the US Christian study centres discussed by Hansen (2021) and Cockle et al. (2024). The common elements of Christian Study Centres identified by Cockle et al. (2024: 414) of offering lectures and seminars, community, and hospitality were certainly shared by MCSI. Also shared was the struggle to make ends meet financially and to reconcile limited staff with a large vision. Important differences from US higher education culture, philanthropic culture, and government regulatory and funding arrangements complicate direct comparisons, but there does seem potential for something like Christian study centres connected with major Australian public universities. A particular feature of the oldest Australian public universities are residential colleges the churches were given land to found on their campuses, and these would be natural locations for new Australian Christian study centres. We see Christian study centres and residential colleges as complementary rather than substitutes for the Christian universities that are being developed in Australia at the moment, such as Avondale and Alphacrucis.

13. Edwin Judge expressed scepticism about plans for a Christian university in his 1994 remarks to a Robert Menzies College conference (now published in [Judge, 2015](#), responding to [Dengerink, 1994](#)). Judge wanted Christians to participate in our public universities, and feared the secularism and low scholarly standards which he observed in many American Christian colleges and universities. Peter Jensen presented the first ever research seminar at Alphacrucis in 2014 on the topic of why there should not be a Christian university, arguing that Christians are needed missionally in our public universities. He previously expressed similar views about schools ([Jensen, 2009](#)). In Catholic circles, similar issues were raised about their new universities ACU and Notre Dame (see for instance [Hill, 1991](#)). [Oslington \(2015\)](#) suggested these arguments about public universities and sectarianism had greater force in the 1950s when these scholars were formed than they do today, and that many things possible in public universities in earlier times are only possible today in a Christian university. Some examples are discussed in [Dalziel \(2021\)](#). The neo-Kuyperian underpinnings of Dengerink's advocacy of separate Christian institutions are criticized in [Oslington \(2020a\)](#). [Dalziel \(2022\)](#) offers a much more detailed examination of Edwin Judge's remarks, placing them in the context of his other historical and educational writings. For all Edwin Judge's concerns about Greco-Roman formal education Dalziel rightly emphasizes that for Judge 'educational concerns were at the heart of Christian community' (p. 31) and reinforces Judge's point that worthwhile Christian universities are costly, difficult and take a long time.
14. An unfortunate consequence of the Foundation switching its previous funding of the Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity to MCSI effectively killed the Centre, and with it the position of its Director Mark Hutchinson. Ironically the Centre's Archives lie next to those of MCSI at Moore College Library.
15. As part of the project, we have collected information about units taught, staffing, and student numbers from various parts of the Archive into a spreadsheet. Some but unfortunately not all the unit outlines are in the Archive.
16. Income contingent loans to cover university fees (HECS) were introduced by the Australian government in 1989, but were not available to theology students until their extension (as FEE-HELP) to private providers in 2005. This meant that after 2005 MCSI students could access loans through ACT enrolment, though still not if taking MCSI units as part of a Macquarie degree.
17. A spreadsheet prepared by the authors documents the income (including donations, students fees etc.), expenses, net profit, and financial position of the Institute from 1998 to 2005. Donations peaked in 2000 at \$412,593 and declined gradually to \$150,012 in 2008. Student fees grew gradually with some fluctuations to a peak of \$195,189 in 2007 before a precipitous drop to \$99,391 in 2008. Overall profitability, including donations, was looking healthy in 2000 at \$146,050 but losses were then incurred for most of the years until 2006, when the Institute returned to just breaking even in the final 2 years of its operation. The closedown in 2008 was orderly as all debts and staff entitlements were paid leaving a balance of less than \$1000 cash.
18. Nonvocational here means training that does not have a clearly identifiable path to paid work. MCSI offered mostly nonvocational courses, with teacher training the exception as a vocational course. It is not ideal terminology for those who emphasise a broad Reformational view of calling beyond ordained ministry, and beyond paid work.
19. A report commissioned by the Australian Council of Deans of Theology ([Oslington, 2020b](#)) examines the economic outcomes for students, as well as impacts on the government budget and economic welfare, of Australian theological education.

20. One of the referees commented that the paper over-emphasizes the financial aspects of MCSI. Part of the point of the article is to highlight the way MCSI regarded finance (including fundraising and dealing with the complex Australian higher education funding regime) as something that would fall into place if they had the vision and academics in order. This was somewhat ironic for an institution that prided itself in integrating all aspects of life with theology. Financial policies and actions express the mission of an institution more powerfully than its published mission statements and values, as argued recently in a book with a strong MCSI heritage (Judd et al., 2023).

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Appendix

Appendix – Archival sources

Macquarie Christian Studies Institute Archives are held by Moore Theological College Library, Sydney. They comprise 44 boxes and seven folders plus some electronic materials. These are the box and folder numbers referred to in the main body of the paper. The bulk of the material is the MCSI Archive as it existed when MCSI ceased operations. Included are MCSI board documents, financial reports, correspondence, course outlines, marketing materials, newsletters, press clippings, photographs, and other material. It was donated to Moore Theological College Library by Stuart Piggin, who along with the last MCSI Director Greg Clarke, arranged storage of the material after MCSI ceased operations. As part of this project, a detailed Finding Guide to the MCSI Archives was prepared by the authors and many of the key documents in the Archives have been scanned and made available as PDFs. The authors have also prepared an MCSI timeline, spreadsheet of units offered, list of MCSI publications, list of board members, and a summary of financial results. These documents are now available in electronic and hardcopy form in the MCSI Archives and the authors would be happy to send any of them to interested researchers.

Macquarie University Archives, Sydney.

Robert Menzies College Archives, Sydney.

Australian College of Theology Archives, Sydney.