



## Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Training Inquiry into the Efficiency, Effectiveness and Coherency of Australian Government Funding for Research

### Alphacrucis College Submission

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Alphacrucis College (AC) welcomes this inquiry into the efficiency, effectiveness and coherency of federal government funding for research and appreciates the opportunity to provide input into this vital initiative.

### BACKGROUND

AC is the national college of Australian Christian Churches (ACC), the largest movement of Pentecostal Churches in Australia, consisting of over 1000 churches (including Hillsong) and over 350,000 constituents. The most recent Australian National Church Life Survey indicated that the Pentecostals have surpassed the Anglicans as the second largest church constituency in terms of Sunday attendance, behind only the Catholic Church. AC has been training students for over seventy years and operates campuses in Sydney, Brisbane, Perth, Hobart, Melbourne, Adelaide and Auckland. Courses are also delivered through onshore and offshore study centres, third parties and a global online platform. All AC higher education courses are accredited by TEQSA, and the plan of the College is to achieve registration as an Australian University as soon as possible. Faculties of Education, Arts, Social Sciences and Business have been added to Theology over the last decade with this in mind. There are currently over 1100 students undertaking accredited higher education courses with AC, including PhD and Doctor of Ministry degrees.

AC faculty are actively involved in research and regularly publish in scholarly journals and other mediums. A recent analysis of our publication performance placed us well above Australian universities in terms of average publications per faculty member. We are therefore highly interested in the outcome of this Inquiry. The College is a member of the Council of Private Higher Education (COPHE) and supports their agenda, but there are some additional issues important to AC that we would like considered by the Inquiry.

### ISSUES OF CONCERN AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These relate to the following terms of reference:

“The diversity, fragmentation and efficiency of research investment across the Australian Government, including the range of programs, guidelines and methods of assessment of grants” and

“Opportunities to maximise the impact of funding”

Our specific recommendations in relation to these terms of reference are as follows:

### **1. Treatment of Research Students at Private Providers**

AC and a small number of private higher education providers offer PhD and other research degrees. Currently, however, only universities receive funding under the government's Research Training Scheme (RTS), despite the fact that AC has received Self Accrediting Authority status from TEQSA for its PhD programs which are accredited according to the same criteria as university PhD programs. The formula for RTS funding is complex but amounts to around \$50,000 per student completion at a university. PhD students at private providers are also ineligible for APRA living allowance scholarships.

The current arrangements are both unfair to PhD students who choose to enrol at private providers, and inefficient because the government funding flows to institutions not necessarily best equipped to supervise certain research areas. Even if a student expresses a preference to enrol at AC, and even if AC has the institutional and faculty expertise most suited to the student's topic, the student is forced to enrol in university PhD programs because of this discrimination in funding arrangements. The university can offer fee relief because of the RTS funding that AC cannot. The situation is particularly grievous when the private provider faculty member, who is ideally suited to supervise the research topic, is then asked by the student to supervise on a voluntary basis at the university which then receives the government funding while not paying the supervisor's salary. This ultimately means that resources are flowing to institutions who are poorly equipped to supervise certain research topics and are therefore not using the funds as efficiently as another institution would. Private providers have different research foci to most universities.

Extension of eligibility for PhD funding to all accredited institutions with research degrees would not increase government expenditure as the main impact would be on the allocation of PhD students between institutions, not the total number of PhD students.

***Recommendation: Government funding for approved PhD and other research degrees through the RTS should not discriminate between universities and private providers. Eligibility for funding should be determined by whether the PhD or other research degree program is approved by TEQSA or delivered by a private provider who has received Self Accrediting Authority status with TEQSA.***

### **2. Access to Competitive Research Funding**

Australian Research Council (ARC) grants are fiercely contested and a major indicator of an institution's research standing. At present, most private providers (including AC) are excluded from applying for ARC grants, even though we have academic staff and research facilities on par with many universities. In the past, universities have objected to private providers being able to compete with them for

ARC funding on the basis that private providers lack the research infrastructure to support major projects. However, this is not a rational basis for blanket exclusion from ARC eligibility, especially as this concern is now dealt with through the substantial weight given to research environment in ARC grant assessment criteria. There does not seem to be any other evidence-based reason to exclude private providers from applying for ARC grants.

Extending eligibility to apply for ARC grants to all institutions which have the capacity to support research would be cost neutral for the government as the total pool of funds would not change, only the allocation between institutions.

Besides equity and improving the efficiency of the system through greater competition, the research carried out at private providers tends to be user-focused and more in line with national research priorities.

***Recommendation: ARC and other government research funding should be open to applications from private providers. To this end, private providers should be added to the list of eligible institutions in the ARC and other scheme guidelines issued by the Minister.***

Thank you for your consideration and we would be happy to further discuss either of these recommendations.

Yours sincerely



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Vice President Academic