

**House Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation
Inquiry into research training and research workforce issues in Australian Universities**

Melbourne College of Divinity Submission, 8/8/08

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1. Contribution to research in Australia

The Melbourne College of Divinity (MCD) has the largest number of Higher Degree by Research (HDR – i.e. masters and doctoral) students in Australia in the area of theology and religious studies. The research undertaken by faculty and HDR students plays an important role in supporting the faith communities which are directly related to the College (which includes Roman Catholic, Anglican, Uniting Church, Baptist, Churches of Christ, and Salvation Army), and facilitates their engagement with each other and with broader Australian society.

We believe that current levels of RTS funding to institutions such as the MCD needs to be boosted to ensure support for a diverse and representative range of HDR candidates, and to reduce the level of financial hardship imposed upon students. To this end, some revision of the current funding formulae which takes into account the substantial differences that exist between a specialist institution such as the MCD, and universities encompassing a broad range of disciplines; and which also takes into account the differences in nature between scholarship in the humanities, and that in the sciences.

2. Challenges in training, recruiting and retaining graduates and staff

A greater and more diverse range of income support should be available to HDR students. For example, candidates coming to higher degrees in theology are generally older, and have often previously been engaged in another field of study and research. They may already have a higher degree in a non-theological field, which would exclude them from consideration for an APA under the current legislation. Thus the conditions for award of an APA at a legislative level should perhaps be relaxed, with more freedom granted to the institution to determine eligibility. The availability of scholarships such as APAs is an important factor in encouraging candidates to pursue research studies.

Ability to attract researchers and academic staff is largely a function of funding. The level of funding needs to be increased and the means of assessing research output needs to be tailored to the context and nature of the institution. For example, assessing levels of “industry funding” is difficult where a religious order may simply set aside time for one of its members to undertake research with the institution, without any money actually changing hands. The assessment of “industry funding” needs to take into account these kind of non-monetary forms of contribution to the MCD, as well as the fact that religious institutions are typically not set up on a commercial basis.

Being a small, specialist institution also means that it is not possible to gain the “economies of scale” which are possible at large universities in relation to administration, maintenance of repositories, interaction with government departments, and so forth. Additional assistance in regard to reporting requirements that are specifically tailored to the institution would be beneficial.