



MELBOURNE COLLEGE OF DIVINITY

Submission to the *Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Legislation Committee*

1. Introduction

The Melbourne College of Divinity welcomes the opportunity to express its views on the Higher Education Funding Amendment Bill 2002. The following response to the proposal to extend the Postgraduate Education Loan Scheme (PELS) to four private institutions, including the MCD, is directed specifically to areas which affect the MCD and its students.

This response takes into account the recently circulated document by the Hon Dr Brendan Nelson, Minister for Education Science and Training: *Education at the Crossroads, principles for a higher education system*, specifically Section 1b dot point 4, **Equitable**: *There must be equality of opportunity in higher education to allow individuals to fulfill their potential, regardless of their personal circumstances and backgrounds.*

This is particularly relevant to the MCD and, more importantly, to its students, in relation to the extension of PELS.

2. The College

The Melbourne College of Divinity (MCD), constituted by an Act of Parliament of the State of Victoria in 1910, is a self-accrediting higher education institution under the terms of the Australian Qualifications Framework Register of Authorities. The MCD is the second oldest institution of higher education in the State of Victoria and is the sixth longest established institution on Schedule 1, comprising 39 Universities and 4 other self-accrediting higher education institutions.

The MCD currently administers the following awards: one undergraduate degree (Bachelor of Theology), six graduate degrees, (five of which are Masters degrees), three doctoral degrees (Doctor of Theology, Doctor of Philosophy, Doctor of Ministry Studies) and a variety of Advanced Diplomas and Graduate Diplomas. Over 8000 degrees and diplomas have

been awarded by the MCD since the first Conferring ceremony in 1911. In excess of 2000 of these have been graduate and postgraduate degrees. The MCD became affiliated with the University of Melbourne in 1993, while maintaining its autonomy and degree conferring status. MCD students can enroll in a BA/BTheol double degree program at the University, and University of Melbourne students can take four MCD units towards their BA degree. The University of Melbourne and the MCD are currently in negotiations to undertake a joint student exchange program.

In addition, Monash University and the MCD offer a BA/BTheol double degree program.

The MCD represents Australia's most significant achievement in the realm of ecumenical cooperation in the teaching of theology and has for many decades been the standard by which theological education in Australia has been judged. The MCD prides itself on its national and international reputation. The universities of Oxford, Berkeley, Princeton, Heidelberg, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Zurich, Mainz, Manchester, Drew, Boston College and many others, as well as Melbourne, Sydney and Monash universities have all accepted MCD graduates into their doctoral programs.

Scrutiny of the qualifications of the faculty members of the MCD's seven colleges, as recorded in the MCD's four Associated Teaching Institution handbooks, indicates the highest level of professional competence.

3. Selection Criteria

Section 27 of the Melbourne College of Divinity Act (1910-1990) states: **No religious test shall be imposed upon any person in order to entitle him to be enrolled by the College or to be a candidate for any examination or to graduate or to receive any diploma or certificate or to be an examiner or to hold any office or employment or any advantage emolument or privilege in connection with the College.**

The MCD unreservedly endorses this statute and rigorously adheres to its requirements. No non-academic selection criteria can exist within the MCD framework.

4. Accountability Processes

The Accountability Processes of the Melbourne College of Divinity are set down by the Melbourne College of Divinity Act (1910-1990). The operations of the MCD, enumerated in the MCD's handbook of Regulations, are overseen by Members of the College, known as the College. The College

meets five times a year and reports annually to the Minister for Education and Training through its Annual Report.

The College's Executive Committee, which can act for and exercise all the powers of the College between its meetings, reports to the College at each College meeting. As a self-accrediting institution, administration of the College's degree and diploma programs are overseen internally by four Boards: Board of Studies (Bachelor of Theology), Board of Studies (Bachelor of Divinity and Diplomas), Board of Postgraduate Studies, Board of Studies in Ministry. The Boards report to the College at each of its meetings, and the College acts in relation to their recommendations concerning course accreditation, appointment of lecturers and awarding of degrees and diplomas.

The MCD's Human Research Ethics Committee oversees the ethical conduct of research involving humans. The Committee reports annually to the College and to the National Health and Medical Research Council, through the Australian Health Ethics Committee.

As one of 43 self-accrediting higher education institutions currently receiving research funding from the Federal Government, the MCD will in future take part in a five yearly comprehensive and systematic audit by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). AUQA will audit the performance of the MCD against its own standards and objectives. The results of the audit will be publicly available.

5. Capacity of the MCD to Engage in Research

The capacity of the MCD to engage in research is evidenced by the fact that it is one of 43 institutions of higher learning that have been chosen by the Federal Government to receive Federal funding as part of its Block Research Funding program, specifically for the Institutional Grant Scheme (IGS), Research Training Scheme (RTS), Research Infrastructure Block Grant Scheme (RIBG), Australian Postgraduate Award Scheme (APA), and the International Postgraduate Research Scholarship (IPRS).

The MCD has set up three committees--a Research Policy Committee, a Research Grants Committee and a Research Scholarships Committee--to administer this funding. It has also created the full-time position of Research Coordinator to coordinate and promote research within the MCD.

One of the initial tasks of the Research Coordinator was to compile a comprehensive Research and Research Training Management Report outlining future directions for Research and Research Training within the MCD. The Research Coordinator presented this Report to the MCD's

Research Policy Committee and submitted it to the (then) Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs. The Report was acknowledged by the Department as having been completed thoroughly and in accordance with its requirements. A similar report was submitted to the Department of Education, Science and Training in June this year.

6. MCD Student Profile

With the exception of a tiny minority of postgraduate students (currently 7), who benefit directly from Federal research funding, all students enrolled in the MCD pay full fees. This places a considerable economic burden on these students, yet also indicates the level of their commitment in pursuing their chosen area of studies. Such commitment is essential as students of theology, who undoubtedly “contribute to a democratic, civilized society and promote the tolerance and debate that underpins it” (*Education at the Crossroads*: section 1:a: 4, p. 2) invariably do not belong to the higher bracket of income earners, either during, or subsequent to, their years of study. Consequently, the MCD, with substantial support from industry (the Churches), strives to keep its fee schedule to the minimum, whilst maintaining the high standards for which it is known. The tension these demands create is increasingly difficult to reconcile. An **equitable solution**, both for the MCD and for its students, is warranted.

7. Recommendation

In view of its long and distinguished history and its national and international standing as the premier provider of theological education in Australia, the Melbourne College of Divinity recommends that the Commonwealth government extend the Postgraduate Education Loan Scheme to the College’s full fee-paying domestic course work graduate students.

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