

**International Network of Societies of Catholic Theology**  
**Meeting at De Paul University, Chicago in June 2011**  
**Theme: The Changing Face of Global Catholicism: Implications**  
**for Theology and Theological Education**  
**Report prepared on behalf of**  
**Australian Catholic Theological Association (ACTA)**

**1. Profile of ACTA**

ACTA has approximately 100 members. The ACTA Constitution requires that the member is a Catholic holding an appropriate postgraduate degree in theology and is currently teaching theology at tertiary level or is actively involved in theological scholarship.

Membership of ACTA includes academics who teach theology in: (i) theologates, under diocesan or provincial authority; (ii) theologates under the authority of a consortium of religious orders; (iii) Catholic universities; and (iv) secular universities.

**2. Location of Theology**

Theology in Catholic theology schools in Australia is located in a range of institutional settings: in theologates, in Catholic universities, and in secular universities. Most theologates are institutional members of larger, usually city-based, ecumenical consortia.

Theologates include both seminarians and lay students; the universities include both seminarians and lay students.

**3. General Profile of Theological Schools in the region – Australia**

A recent comprehensive study of theological education in Australia (Charles Sherlock, *Uncovering Theology*, ATF Press/ALTC, 2009) showed that approximately 14,000 students, equivalent to approximately 6,200 full time students (of whom approximately 250 are in research programs), were studying theology in Australian accredited tertiary institutions. These students are enrolled in a range of theological education providers and ecumenical settings, including schools operated under the auspices of a range of Christian Churches or institutions in Australia – Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Baptist, Pentecostal, Churches of Christ, Uniting Church, Salvation Army, Orthodox, as well as others.

Faculty in the theological schools across the sector comprises approximately 500 full-time and 500 part-time.

#### **4. General Trends in Student Enrolments**

The students fall into three broad categories:

- Those preparing for a Christian ministry (a high proportion of whom study full-time, often with a ministry placement)
- Those looking to deepen their Christian understanding (often part-time)
- Those taking theology as part of another course (typically, Arts, Education, Nursing, Counselling), usually as a core requirement

In terms of age: The profile of theological students is varied. Students' ages run from the low twenties to retirement age and beyond, the average being about 40 years. Women and men now figure in approximately equal numbers in most theology providers. Women, however, form the minority of research candidates.

In terms of background: For many years, students have been coming to Australia, from a variety of language backgrounds, to study theology. There has been a growth in the number of domestic students studying theology who come from non-English speaking backgrounds. Together, they pose language issues as well as pedagogical issues in the teaching of theology, challenging assumptions concerning teaching and learning, prompting theological institutions to adapt their learning processes, and requiring additional provision of student support services.

A further challenge for faculty is the often different religious and cultural sensibilities they bring with them. For example, students from eastern Catholic churches, or students from Asia and Africa, for whom piety and theology are not much differentiated, and who find western ways of doing theology challenging.

#### **5. Challenges in theological education in Australia**

The following challenges present themselves for theological education in the Australian context:

- **Decline in Church affiliation:** Perhaps the most significant challenge to theological education in Australia is the decline in Church affiliation in Australian society. (Approximately 26% of the Australian population of 22 million persons describes itself as Catholic in the national census. Current estimates indicated that approximately 15% of the Catholic population are regular Church-goers.)
- **Changing Church demographics:** The profile of the Australian Catholic Church is also changing, with Australian population growth including significant numbers of migrants who are Catholic (coming from India, Vietnam, Philippines, South America, and Africa). A significant trend in theological education, particularly in the theologates, is the increased number of students coming from non-English speaking backgrounds, who require considerable assistance with English language skills and appropriate student support services.
- **Changes in the faculty (staff) profile:** In the theologates, it remains the case that the majority of faculty are ordained or members of religious orders, with remuneration by stipend, and thus the effective subsidisation of the theologates by the relevant religious orders and/or dioceses. The current age profile of theological educators in Australia, with significant numbers of faculty approaching retirement age, challenges the sector to be much more strategic and intentional in preparing the next generation of theologians and preparing for them in terms of sustainable and financially viable structures. The ageing of the membership of

religious orders and the clergy is mirrored in the faculty in the theologates. The challenge is to replace ageing faculty, given the low numbers of candidates joining religious orders and the clergy. In the universities, faculty are predominantly lay people, the majority with doctorates. Only a minority of academics in the university settings have pontifical degrees. Only a small proportion of faculty in both theologates and universities have degrees from institutions in Rome.

- Financial challenges: In theologates, most faculty are currently stipended rather than salaried and there is a significant cost impost to be accommodated if lay faculty are to be recruited to replace stipended faculty.
- Flexible delivery of courses: Online flexible delivery is of growing importance and represents a significant proportion of enrolments. It poses significant resource challenges as well as pedagogical challenges to theology providers and their faculty. Key issues are quality assurance, copyright, staff training and the provision of electronic library resources.
- In the Catholic universities, the adoption of a core curriculum which introduces students to Catholic world views and teachings, along lines somewhat similar to those courses in North America, is generating a demand for lecturers in the field.
- Collaboration: A vital aspect of the challenges and the opportunities we face in Australia is the possibility of closer collaboration and more effective stewardship and deployment of resources (financial and capital, as well as personnel) among theological providers, in service to the discipline of theology and to the Church we serve.

## **6. Concerns regarding Working Conditions**

As noted above, the remuneration of faculty and/or their religious order or diocese is an issue, particularly for the theologates. The rise of the lay/non-ordained theologian and the emergence of theology in the universities have brought with them new financial imperatives and burdens. If lay people are to be appointed to replace ageing clergy or members of religious orders, remuneration must be sufficient to provide a reasonable living for the academic and his/her dependants.

Changing expectations of Church authorities can pose challenges, particularly in the Catholic universities. Some Episcopal authorities are seeking and urging a catechetical approach as distinct from a more academic approach to the study of theology. It is also of concern that some Church authorities are very ready to listen to complaints in regard to matters of perceived lack of orthodoxy or perceived departure from Church rulings.

## **7. Key Themes or Priorities for Theological Study**

There is the ever present challenge to nurture critical engagement with the ideas and issues.

Theological education in the radically pluralised and de-traditionalised post modern society that is Australia must deal constructively with the questions and issues posed by post-modernity.

It is challenged further by the already low, and declining, level of religious literacy and culture in the population generally and thus the low base of theological literacy skills in many of the students who enroll in theological courses. The issue is even greater in theological education delivered as service teaching and core curriculum.

In the multicultural and multifaith society that is Australia, it needs to be ecumenically attuned but also attentive to dialogue with the world religions.

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