



Responding to questions about the decision relating to New Directions in Theological Education

1 Perth College of Divinity and Murdoch University

The Perth College of Divinity is a partnership between Perth Theological Hall (UCA) and Wollaston Theological College (Anglican). Both the Baptist and Roman Catholic churches were previously part of the partnership, but chose to withdraw several years ago. The Perth College of Divinity has an Agreement with Murdoch University to provide staff to enable Theology degrees to be offered by the university.

Currently Murdoch only offers post graduate degrees in Theology. In 2014 Murdoch discontinued undergraduate degrees in Theology. The basic ordinand course is now a 3 year Masters of Divinity and a Masters of Chaplaincy has also been developed.

The current cohort of Murdoch Theology students across all degrees is small – in 2017, there are only 50 individuals enrolled across five different awards (5 in Graduate Certificate, 25 in two different Graduate Diplomas, 14 in Master of Divinity and 6 in Master of Chaplaincy). In addition, Faculty supervise research students in the Doctoral programme. We do not have precise information about these enrolments, nor do we know exactly how many of these students are Uniting Church members or actively engaged in a church community. We do know that some are from interstate or overseas.

Murdoch has since 2014 focussed on studies in Religion in undergraduate degrees. Religious Studies focus on comparative religions, which is valuable to promote cross cultural understandings. However this is a separate discipline to the teaching of Christian Theology. Currently some Murdoch Theology staff are more involved in the teaching of Religion than Christian Theology. It is unclear how many of the students enrolled in these units are from church backgrounds, but it is clear that many are from interstate and overseas. While this is a valuable outreach the question needs to be asked, is teaching Comparative Religion to these undergraduates a priority for the UCA in WA?

While individual units in Religion attract high enrolments, the **Bachelor of Arts (Religion)**, also established in 2014, has not proven popular and is not now accepting new enrolments. The President of PCD reported at the 2017 AGM that “the BA (Religion) major, with only a minimal Theology component, has not proved attractive”, and noted that “non-graduates are barely able to access Theology at all”. This means that Murdoch is currently unable to provide undergraduate studies in Theology.

The historical value of the PCD-Murdoch programme in past decades is not disputed. It was a development appropriate for its time. We are in a different situation and a new form of programme is needed.



2 Costs of the current programme

UCA spending on staffing through the PCD/Murdoch partnership has focussed on a narrow cohort of learners (namely, candidates who are able to enrol at Masters level). Currently there is only one UCA candidate enrolled at Murdoch. Amongst the group of people undertaking a Period of Discernment, only another 1 or 2 could feasibly consider enrolling in a Master's degree.

Cost-effectiveness is very poor because of this narrow focus. We have been contributing to the funding of three University positions which educate only a small number of UCA people each year.

Cost to each student undertaking a Master of Divinity is around \$40,000. Students who are Australian Citizens can apply for HELP assistance from the government, but others (such as Permanent Residents who are not Citizens) must pay up-front for their study. Some of the potential candidates from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) congregations are affected by this, which makes preparing for ministry a very expensive exercise (completing an undergraduate degree then a M.Div.). Cost makes this prohibitive and rules some people out. A request to PCD to ask Murdoch to explore this problem met with the response that "no action is possible at this time".

Focus on spending within the PCD/Murdoch partnership limits the ability of the church to respond to other educational needs, as indicated below.

3 Church Engagement

The changing shape of church and society requires proactive and creative forms of education and formation across the whole church. Other UCA theological colleges are changing their programs in response to the needs of the church and the new National Standards (see below). A focus beyond the university to provide education accessible to congregational leaders is evident in other UCA colleges.

There is a **fundamental need to develop the theological capacity of all members across the church**, rather than maintain a narrow focus on a small leadership group through higher-level university courses. The new directions in theological education place this focus at the centre of future developments.

It is also recognised that there needs to be a **re-orientation of theological education to provide missional leadership** for growing the church through equipping of congregational leaders by use of short-term courses, intensive small-group support, face-to-face and online interactions.

There are existing cohorts of adult learners currently within the UCA in Western Australia who are keen to undertake foundational theological studies (Cert IV and Diploma). There are already more UCA people enrolled in these studies than there are UCA people who can be identified as being enrolled in Murdoch degrees in theology. It is clear that, with added educational support, these cohorts will grow in the coming years.



Current Murdoch Theology staff have limited capacity to engage in education outside of the university context. The two reviews of existing Faculty members conducted in 2016 noted that the demands of their work in the university mean they have little capacity to engage in education in other contexts.

The strong Research Profile of current Faculty has been affirmed in the reviews. This is an important area for the University, and it places great value on the high research profile of its teaching staff. This places constraints of the time available for Faculty to be available for teaching across the church. Good research is also important for the church, but only if the fruits of this research are communicated through students taught by the Faculty, and further disseminated through engagement with congregations across the church. This has been happening with only limited reach.

In the current arrangement, both **limited accessibility** (the basic theology degree is at Masters level) and **limited orientation** (the focus is on university degrees, with little engagement with congregationally-focussed education) means that the current offerings do not meet the needs of the church in WA.

4 New Directions in Education

The shape of education as a whole is changing. Many universities are reviewing and redeveloping their offerings.

A system of 'nested' awards in the tertiary sector means that a person can commence the study of Theology at one level (say, a Cert IV in Christian Life and Ministry) and, on completion of that award, proceed on to the next level (for instance, a Diploma of Ministry) and receive credit for study already completed. The system of nested awards means a person can continue, proceeding over time from Diploma to Bachelor and even to Masters, if that is deemed relevant. It is now very easy for earlier study in the area to be credited to the next level of study.

Innovation is evident in the way that theology programmes are offered in many places. The distinction between "distance education" and "classroom lectures" is being broken down. There is continued expansion and development of **Online Learning Environments (OLE)** in the universities which offer theological education. This offers opportunities for creativity and innovative developments.

Developments in online technology mean that it is now possible for students to engage online with their teachers and other students in **real time interactions** as well as through chat rooms and forums which allow a student to post at a time convenient to them, and then return to read responses at a later time which is also convenient to them.

5 National Standards

In the UCA the Assembly sets **National Standards** for theological education, and all UCA accredited theological colleges are required to adhere to these Standards. In November 2016 the Assembly Standing Committee adopted new National Standards for the ordinand course which came into effect on 1 January 2017.



A key focus in the revised Standards is on **the integration of academic and practical components of formation with a clear commitment to the UCA**. This is desired outcome for candidates, and an essential quality in those who teach them. Such a focus cannot be guaranteed by Murdoch University. Experience in recent appointments is that religious affiliation is marginalised or undervalued. It is given to the funding church as a responsibility to ensure this; the University distances itself from this matter. This does not allow for the fostering of an integrated approach to teaching and learning.

Another emphasis in the revised Standards is on **the provision of flexible pathways** (which may or may not include the completion of a degree or diploma, while also completing the requirements for ordination). Murdoch has determined that it is not offering Diploma or Cert IV offerings and the BA (Religion) does not meet the needs of candidates. This leaves a large gap in what the church needs.

The revised Standards recognise that the UCA needs to respond to **the increasing interest in POD/candidature from CALD communities and from within the Congress**. Finances and qualifications mean that students cannot enrol in the existing Murdoch degrees, so we need to be able to offer viable pathways for such applicants and candidates.

6 National Networking

There is **widespread concern** that the UCA is not responding to the changes in demographic and numbers within the church, and is continuing to support educational structures across the continent which were helpful and relevant 30 years ago, but which are not now so. There is a current opportunity to **work creatively** in developing national networks across UCA teachers of theology. The new directions in theological education in WA will place us at the forefront of this opportunity. We will be able to engage with, and shape the future of, theological offerings in creative ways.

There is an opportunity to **explore relationships with other UCA colleges** which each provide strengths in designated areas (such as cross cultural ministry, leadership, or contextual mission). Faculty of UCA colleges have a range of skills and expertise across a wide range of areas. Students could enrol online with such UCA faculty members and it would be possible for a number of these faculty to visit Western Australia to spend time with both candidates formally enrolled in theology studies, ministers undergoing continuing education and lay leaders from congregations. This is an exciting area of development.

Participating in this way in a growing national network of theological education would have **benefits to candidates** who would be studying alongside candidates from other Synods as well as non-candidate students. It would strengthen a sense of the national church to which we all belong.

Ecumenical commitment remains strong in the proposed new developments in theological education. Most interstate universities which involve the UCA in teaching Theology do have partners from a number of denominations, alongside the UCA. Engagement with other students across the denominational spread would still be secure.

PRESBYTERY STANDING COMMITTEE

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