

The Secretary  
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education  
Legislation Committee  
Suite S1.61, Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

The following submission to the Committee examining provisions of the proposed Higher Education Funding Amendment Bill 2002 has been submitted by—

Rev Dr Mark Harding  
Dean  
Australian College of Theology  
6/388 Anzac Parade  
Kingsford NSW 2032  
Ph.: 02 9663 2495  
Fax: 02 9313 6345  
Email: [info@act.org.au](mailto:info@act.org.au)

The Australian College of Theology welcomes the proposal contained in this Bill to extend the Postgraduate Education Loans Scheme (PELS) to four private institutions—two of which are self-accrediting, and two non self-accrediting.

We believe that the extension of the scheme represents an incremental change to funding of higher education in Australia that in time should be extended to the other duly accredited higher education providers in the private sector like the Australian College of Theology. As such the amendment being considered is just and equitable.

Denying access to PELS for full-fee paying students enrolled at private institutions in postgraduate theological courses is discriminatory. Founding and maintaining a research culture requires considerable expense in terms of library facilities and faculty. These costs are passed on to students. Access to PELS will enable institutions to underwrite their commitment to research more freely, knowing that full-time students can defer the payment of their fees until they are in the work force. Increasingly the viability of some institutions in the network of the Australian College of Theology is being seriously compromised. Only the wealthiest institution will be able to mount postgraduate theological education in the future. Access to PELS will contribute to the viability and diversity of the sector. Access will also promote student choice.

Nevertheless, the research output of institutions affiliated with the Australian College of Theology is impressive, despite the fact that not one of them has received any government funding. This is the result of consistent, sacrificial private funding of buildings, library and faculty resources over many decades (and in the case of some institutions, over more than a century) in order to inform undergraduate teaching and the preparing of men and women for a wide range of informed public ministries. The College has been able to make a contribution of \$130,000 over the last six years to the training of faculty towards completing research doctoral qualifications at prestigious overseas institutions. The intellectual and institutional capital of the postgraduate institutions of the Australian College of Theology represents a significant contribution to

the educational and social fabric of this country. Access to PELS funding will in part ensure that the mission of these institutions will continue.

Access to PELS will encourage participation in the private sphere, particularly in a discipline like theology which historically has not been taken up by the universities. Indeed the strength of the theological education sector in Australia is a result of the universities intentionally leaving such education to the private sector. In recent years a number of universities (chiefly Charles Sturt, Murdoch, Flinders, and Griffith) have begun to teach theology in partnership with local ecumenical consortia. However, the great majority of theological undergraduate and postgraduate courses are still conducted in the private sector. My estimate is that the three large ecumenical consortia (the Melbourne College of Divinity, the Sydney College of Divinity and the Australian College of Theology) together enroll 2,750–3,000 EFTSU's. However, without access to PELS, students in the private theological sector will be increasingly at a disadvantage compared to their peers enrolled in the universities. Only the wealthy will be able to afford postgraduate theological education in the future.

The Australian College of Theology notes that the proposed change is concerned with loans to students and not institutional funding. No money will be removed from the public sphere.

Full-fee paying courses taught by institutions affiliated with the Australian College of Theology can be offered more economically than many postgraduate courses offered by Australian universities. Students would pay in the vicinity of \$5,000 per annum for a full-time place. This means that the initial impost to the federal government will not be as great as might be expected from similar courses offered by the universities.

The Australian College of Theology has a current total enrolment of 1,100 EFTSU's, which makes it the largest private provider of higher education in the non self-accrediting sector in Australia. It is an ecumenical consortium, its theological awards taught by some 25 approved full-fee paying institutions in every state. The College was established by the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia in 1891. In 2001 its entire suite of awards was accredited by a concurrent accreditation committee, set up under the MCEETYA protocols, at which all states were represented. The College offers higher education awards from the two year diploma to the professional and research doctorates.

The College has a current postgraduate enrolment of 310 EFTSU's in awards in theology. Most of these are enrolled in coursework programs. Graduates contribute significantly to Australian society through their active involvement in community building, social welfare, education and youth programs.

Enrolment in any award of the College is not subject to any religious test.

Currently the College enrolls as many women as it does men in its undergraduate awards. Access to PELS will encourage more women to study full-time at postgraduate level.

Mark Harding  
26 July 2002