

12 August 2002

Mr John Carver
Secretary
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Legislation Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT

By email: eet.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear John

Re: Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Legislation Committee
Inquiry into Provisions of the Higher Education Funding Amendment Bill 2002

Following the Committee's public hearings in Canberra on 8 August, I now provide supplementary information for the Committee on behalf of Christian Heritage College.

The information provided below is of two kinds; answers to questions taken on notice, and brief responses to certain issues which arose in the evidence given by other witnesses.

1. Question on notice: Would Christian Heritage College agree to be accountable to the Commonwealth in exactly the same ways as public universities are?

Christian Heritage College would agree to report data to the Commonwealth in the same ways as public universities do.

However two caveats should be entered.

Firstly the level of accountability expected should be reasonably proportional to the amount of public subsidy involved. PELS is primarily a benefit to the student, and the level of public subsidy involved remains a matter of some debate. It is also a matter of ongoing debate as to whether any public subsidy accrues to the institution, and if so to what extent. Under these circumstances, it is not clear whether the public interest would be appropriately served by requiring an institution receiving a possibly minute subsidy to be accountable in exactly the same way as an institution receiving in excess of \$250 million per annum in public funds.

Secondly, private institutions are accredited by State accrediting authorities, and already provide a range of information to State authorities as part of their accountability to these accrediting bodies. It would appear that much of the information so provided is different in kind to the reporting of public universities to State governments. It will be important to avoid costly overlap between or duplication of reporting to State and Commonwealth authorities.

2. Question on notice: What is the average age of postgraduate students at Christian Heritage College?

The average age of current postgraduate coursework students at Christian Heritage College is 40.1 years. Fifteen current postgraduate coursework students are over fifty years of age.

While Christian Heritage College has information about the employment destinations of past graduates, the College holds no information on the current employment of present students, on their possible future employment, or on their current or possible future salary levels. Nor does the College have any information about which current or future students might take up the option of a PELS loan. Hence the College has no information at present about likely repayment rates of PELS debt.

3. Compliance with anti-discrimination legislation

Section 6 of Christian Heritage College's submission to the Committee discussed the question of entry criteria in the light of principles applying in the domain of Commonwealth jurisdiction. However questions relating to State anti-discrimination legislation also arose in evidence given to the Committee.

Christian Heritage College complies fully with the *Anti-Discrimination Act (Queensland) 1991*. This Queensland Act prohibits discrimination on the grounds of any of thirteen specific attributes. Section 29 of the Act provides, for educational institutions established for religious purposes, certain exemptions which parallel the HREOC principles discussed in the CHC submission. Section 38 of the Queensland Act deals with discrimination in relation to admissions criteria for prospective students. However Sections 40 and 41 contain specific exemptions which provide for religious educational institutions to exclude applicants on religious grounds.

Of course, these exemptions for educational institutions to discriminate lawfully on the grounds of religion apply only to the field of religion. They do not exempt such institutions from compliance with all other provisions of Commonwealth and State anti-discrimination legislation.

Christian Heritage College would therefore contend that the "democratically established criteria", to use the words of one witness, specifically include lawful discrimination on the grounds of religion, and that the College complies fully with the provisions of all Commonwealth and State anti-discrimination legislation.

4. Commitment to free and open inquiry

Evidence given to the Committee by a number of witnesses appeared to assume that private Christian higher education institutions were not committed to free and open inquiry, to intellectual freedom, or to openness to a variety of perspectives. Christian Heritage College would contest this view.

Prior to the accreditation of its first program in 1988, the College was required to demonstrate its commitment to academic freedom, and developed at that time a detailed statement in relation to academic freedom.

Indeed it should not be assumed that secular scholarship is by definition more free than scholarship that is informed by religious commitments. Commenting specifically on the North American scene, Anthony Diekema, in his *Academic Freedom and Christian Scholarship* (2000) notes several current threats to academic freedom in secular universities and argues persuasively that Christian higher education institutions are equally as committed to the protection of academic freedom as their secular counterparts.

5. Market advantage of PELS eligibility

Members of the Committee sought responses from several witnesses on the question of whether eligibility to participate in PELS arrangements conferred a market advantage upon an institution.

As discussed in Section 3 of the College's submission, Christian Heritage College would contend that the introduction of PELS only in the public sector did indeed confer a significant unintended market advantage on public universities.

The question of whether the four institutions covered by the current bill might receive a market advantage depends very much on who their principal competitors are. In Christian Heritage College's case, its major competitors are public universities.

It is likely that this situation would be repeated across the private higher education sector; that is, that private institutions are not primarily in competition with other private institutions, but rather with public universities. Hence CHC would contend that the four institutions covered by the present bill are unlikely to be receiving a market advantage vis-à-vis other private institutions. Rather it is a case of market disadvantage vis-à-vis the public sector being redressed.

I appreciated the opportunity to appear before the Committee last week.

Yours sincerely

Brian Millis
Principal
Christian Heritage College