

# Threshold Learning Outcomes in Australian Theological Education

## Draft for Discussion at the ANZATS AGM

In this document the *Council of Deans of Theology*, in cooperation with the *Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools*, offers Threshold Learning Outcomes for a Bachelor of Theology degree, with three academic / professional fields.

The document was prepared by a representative steering committee, which drew on responses from Australian Higher Education Providers offering Bachelor degrees in Theology. **Feedback on the document is being sought from interested parties.**

### *The nature and extent of the discipline – what is Theology?*

‘Theology’ as a term combines the Greek words ‘theos’ (God / the divine) and ‘logos’ (learning / reflection). As such, theology is classically described as ‘the knowledge of God’, carrying the senses of ‘exploring what is known about God’, and ‘reflection on what knowing God means’, not only as regards individual and communal spirituality, but for social and personal living. In sum, it involves ‘faith seeking understanding.’ As a Christian enterprise, theology has its centre in considering the significance of Jesus Christ, and the understandings of God, creation and humankind which flows from this revelation.

Theology must speak into a three-fold audience - church, academy and the public domain. This latter audience, the general Australian public, embodies a mix of Christian, post-Christendom, secular and multi-faith dimensions. Yet the discipline of Theology is inseparable from questions of allegiance, world-view, ethical and social commitments. Engaging in theology involves relationships, often supportive, sometimes sharply contested, since the questions explored touch personal identity, the nature and direction of society and the meaning of life – human, organic and cosmic.

The study of Theology thus forms a key part in the preparation of Christian ministers. In Australia today, however, the majority of students take it up for wider reasons, from deepening their Christian understanding, to exploring spirituality and religious practice out of curiosity and a need to consider fundamental questions which society does not or is not able to address. The student body is much more culturally diverse than a generation back, and across Australia women and men are roughly equal in numbers.

As an academic discipline, over the centuries rigorous methods of exploration and critique have been developed in theology, including philosophical, textual, historical and (in the last century) in the social sciences. Care is taken neither to exclude particular church commitments from scrutiny, nor to dismiss them – as in political science, critique and commitment go hand in hand.

### *The Bachelor of Theology*

A Bachelor of Theology is built around three inter-acting loci of study, as reflected in the three ‘Threshold Learning Outcomes from areas of academic / professional fields’ below:

- a) **‘Biblical Studies’** engages with the foundational texts of the Christian tradition, comprising the Old / First and the New Testaments, its ‘canon’ of authoritative writings (‘scriptures’). This involves genre analysis of the highly varied literature involved, study (at appropriate levels) of the original Hebrew / Aramaic and Greek texts, and learning a range of critical tools for their interpretation and use.
- b) **‘Theological and Historical Studies’** deals with understanding the path of Christian faith in its historical engagements, and the ways by which the beliefs involved from faith have been systematised into integrated worldviews. This study employs philosophy, and constant interaction with alternative perspectives, whether from other Christian traditions, other faiths or ideologies.

- c) **‘Ministry and Mission’** explores the implications of Christian faith for living, and – conversely – the impact on Christian beliefs of changing and varied contexts, especially in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region. Such theological reflection can be considered in relation to the life of the churches (‘ministry’ – e.g. liturgy, pastoral care, personal ethics, religious education, spirituality) and wider society (‘mission’ – evangelisation, social ethics, pastoral care, inter-faith dialogue), though the line between these is blurred, as the lists of disciplines reflects.

A Bachelor of Theology degree typically requires a Major in each of the first two loci, and study in the third, in which a Major can also be taken, but whose ethos typically has an ‘across the curriculum’ influence.

But a Bachelor of Theology as a whole involves more than the study of particular disciplines separately – it seeks to help a student integrate these both together, and in his or her person, so equipping them to be able to continue with lifestyle of integrity, an outcome shared with other disciplines in the humanities. Attitudinal outcomes are therefore looked for, alongside knowledge and skills, but how these are assessed, or thresholds set in place, is a complex matter

In contrast to much university education in Australia, however, theological education is typically set in the context of a community of learning that embraces students, faculty and staff, and regards study, prayer, reflective practice and living as a formative whole. Experience shows that this setting does not distort academic freedom: rather, it fosters the (seemingly paradoxical) reality that only as students have a sense of safety and integrative growth do they find themselves open to explore new and ‘dangerous’ ideas openly. And since Theology is concerned with what is ultimately real, true and good, its own commitments continue to set fairness, consistency and openness at its heart.

## **1 Threshold Learning Outcomes for Graduates holding the Degree of Bachelor of Theology**

Upon completion of a Bachelor in Theology degree, a graduate will be able to

- i) demonstrate an ability to engage in the detailed study, and principled interpretation, of the primary texts of the Christian faith, and critically interact with the range of historical and contemporary reflection on those texts, appreciating the different traditions and contexts in which these reflections are situated;
- ii) demonstrate an understanding of theology as a coherent academic discipline, including familiarity with its concepts, history and principal sub-disciplines, acknowledging the diversity of viewpoints that characterise scholarship in the discipline as a whole and **in** relation to other worldviews;
- iii) show evidence of the development of the creative, critical and reflective thinking and research skills that will support a life of continued theological learning;
- iv) critically engage their context - personal, church and in diverse community settings - in the light of their understanding of theology, and be able to communicate theological ideas, principles and knowledge to specialist and non-specialist audiences using a variety of means: this will have particular regard for the realities of Australian experiences;
- v) articulate the implications of Christian belief for all of life.

## **2 Threshold Learning Outcomes for three Academic / Professional Fields**

### **2.1 *Biblical Studies***

Graduates with a major in Biblical Studies will be able to

- i) interpret and understand biblical texts in their historical, social, linguistic and cultural contexts;

- ii) identify the contents and shape of the Bible as a whole and its nature as a text;
- iii) reflect theologically on biblical texts and integrate biblical studies with other theological and social disciplines;
- iv) explain and apply a variety of methodologies in interpreting biblical texts;
- v) where biblical languages are studied, read basic biblical texts in the original language/s and use knowledge of issues in morphology, syntax and grammar in producing an idiomatic English translation and in better understanding of the biblical texts.

## **2.2 *Theology and historical studies***

Graduates with a major in Theology will be able to

- i) describe the nature, purposes and sources employed in the discipline of theology as an integrative system of Christian belief;
- ii) furnish a coherent account of the way in which the key doctrines of the Christian faith relate to one another and contribute to the whole;
- iii) display a nuanced appreciation of the role and relevance of historical, socio-political, linguistic and cultural influences in the development of Christian doctrine;
- iv) demonstrate a critical sensitivity to how the Christian faith has been expressed in and through history;
- v) recognize the integrative nature of theology for the Christian tradition as a whole (its ecumenical sensitivity), formed by and informing both contextual factors and the legitimate place of denominational perspectives;
- vi) articulate how history and theology inform the contemporary practice of Christian living, both personal and communal, and foster the communication of Christian perspectives.

## **2.3 *Ministry and Mission*<sup>1</sup>**

Graduates with a major in Ministry and Mission will be able to:

- i) articulate and assess the biblical and theological foundations of ministry and mission, and incorporate these and other scholarly resources into a contemporary theology of praxis;
- ii) demonstrate a capacity for critical self-reflection, and be able to articulate a mature and authentic awareness of self and others, and our place in, and responsibility for, God's creation;
- iii) work effectively with one's experience and practice (personal and/or professional), integrating the insights of the social and behavioural sciences and/or cultural studies, and engaging with the written, contextual and living texts of ministerial practice;
- iv) show-a working knowledge of the basic tenets and worldviews associated with the world's major non-Christian religions and contemporary ideologies and spiritualities;
- v) demonstrate a capacity to contextualize and communicate and Christian faith within the diversity of multi-cultural and multi-faith Australian society, by acting ethically, speaking with integrity and modelling Christian behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf *Strengthening the AQF Consultation*, page 32:  
 Characteristics of Learning Outcomes - Bachelor Degree: References to Knowledge and Application / Skills:  
 Development of the ability to review, consolidate, extend and apply the knowledge and techniques learnt, including in a professional context.

## **Appendix: *Origins of the draft Threshold Learning Outcomes***

Many thanks to all the HEPs that provided Threshold Learning Outcomes in response to the earlier email from the Steering Committee. These were all incorporated into a summary document and circulated around the group - Rob McIver [chair]; Paul Beirne [vice-chair]; Bill Salier; Clive Pearson; with Charles Sherlock assisting and contributing to the editorial process.

The Committee concluded that many common themes emerged from the TLOs that had been submitted. Wording was thus developed to represent these common themes, often based on something already in one or other of the submissions. The end product was then examined, a preamble about Theology added, and a further round of discussion of the whole concluded. The result is this document.

### ***Process of consultation***

No member of the Steering Committee thinks that the document as circulated cannot be improved or changed. It is expected that, as widespread consultations take place, the wording will be improved. It could be that some items will be added, some merged, and others dropped.

It is hoped that the draft TLOs will be considered by each institution that teaches a BTh, and that they also will consult with their constituencies or reference groups as to the appropriateness of these TLOs. Written responses can be forwarded to Charles Sherlock, secretary@anzats.edu.au, before July 31.

It is also hoped that institutions which already have faculty members who are attending the ANZATS Conference in Melbourne (July 7-9) will brief them on some of the key issues as they see it so that they may represent them at its AGM. This year's meeting, as with the Auckland AGM which engaged with the first stage of the *Uncovering Theology* project, could be one of more than usual significance.

### ***Questions***

While there was much that the Steering Committee could agree upon, there was quite a lively discussion on some points. For example:

- 1) Have we adequately taken account of the fact that we are developing *Threshold* learning outcomes – i.e. the minimum standard that might be expected, or have we been too aspirational? We have struggled to keep the TLOs to a minimum, recognizing that each institution will wish to add to them to ensure that their degree fits the needs of their students and other stakeholders.
- 2) Have we noted things that can be *measured*, and demonstrated to TEQSA?
- 3) What is the difference between a BTh and a BMin, or other similar first degree in theology? And should these differences be embodied in the Threshold Learning Outcomes? Are biblical languages an essential part of a BTh, and is a major in Ministry and Mission an essential part of a BMin?

It is to be expected that these, and other issues that are sure to be raised, will make the discussion about Threshold Learning Outcomes a lively one.

The Steering Committee, the Council of Deans of Theology and the Council of ANZATS, will all welcome your input as we work together on this document, which has the potential to be of such importance to the sector.

Robert McIver  
for the Steering Committee  
28 June 2010