

# Transforming Theology

## Lead Article:

### • Transforming Students in Theology: *what they seek; what they find.*

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*Incorporating Student Experience and Transformative Learning into Curriculum Design and Planning of Undergraduate Theological Degrees.*

A National Research Project supported by the  
AUSTRALIAN LEARNING & TEACHING COUNCIL and the  
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## Transforming Students in Theology *What they seek; what they find*

The research project has conducted a wide-ranging survey of theology students across Australia. Two salient items in the survey addressed first year students as they entered theological study and final year students nearing the completion of their course with regard to what sort of transformative experience they initially anticipated and ultimately underwent. Their thoughts provide useful reading.

### *Students' Initial Aspirations*

The most important expressed aspiration in undertaking theological study is the acquisition of deeper theological/biblical knowledge accompanied by personal spiritual development. While the acquisition of practical ministry skills is also commonly seen as important, the outcome of paid vocational employment is not widely considered to be nearly as

important as the elements of knowledge and personal development. The social dimensions of interpersonal relations and cultural issues, while more important than vocational employment, are not considered as important as knowledge and personal development.

In general, the student voices heard in the research have revealed that, in terms of *goals* in undertaking theological study, cognitive learning and skills development are more significant than personal transformation, and so the felt attractiveness of "transformation" may not be as strong as suggested by the colleges' promotional material.

### *Students' Transformative Experiences*

However, while not a common goal, personal transformation has been a common *outcome* of the

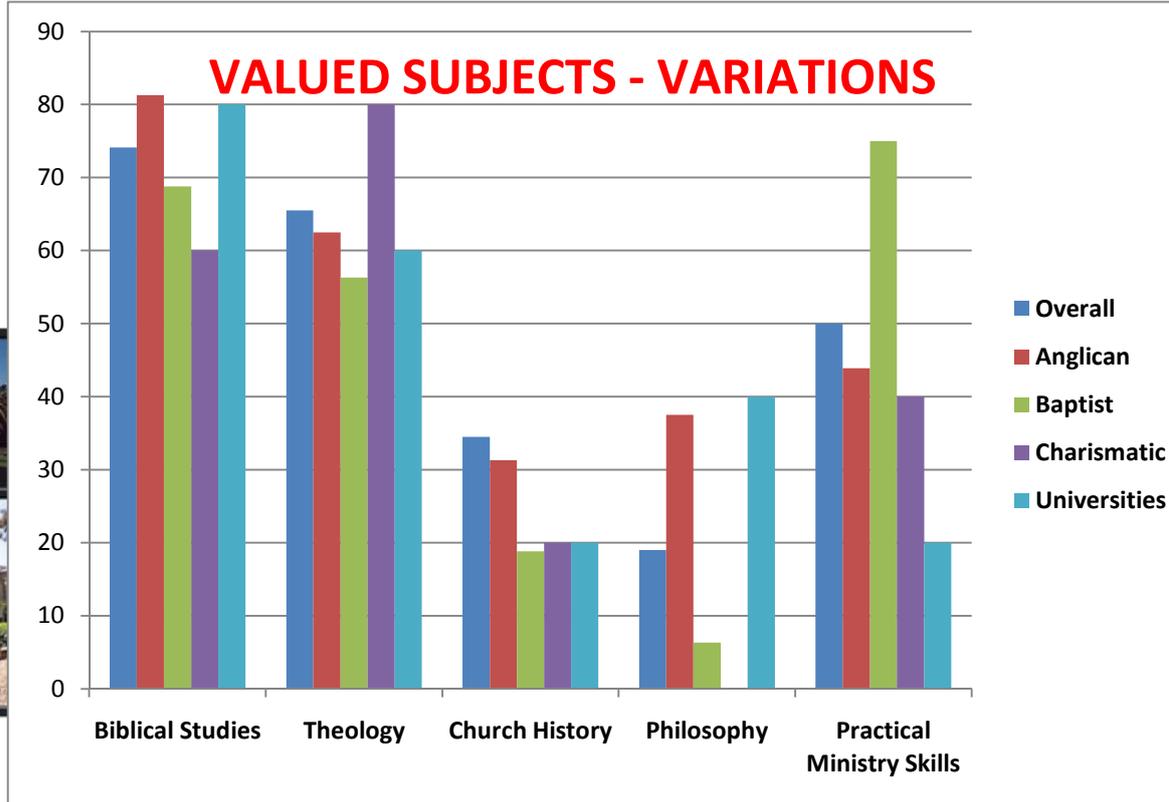
study in some ways, though it is usually expressed in terms of reaching one's full and hitherto unknown potential rather than as a radical change. Many students reported the intense personal challenge involved in engaging a critical study of sacred texts and doctrines, generally with a resultant strengthening of levels of faith and tolerance, despite the oft-expressed sense of lack of spiritual support in the schools for such an intensely personal struggle. Nearly all students reported an expansion of intellectual horizons and critical thinking and a broadening of tolerance towards other theological and ecclesial positions. Growth in theological knowledge and understanding led to a greater degree of simultaneous humility and confidence in terms of personal identity and role.

## From the Research



### Most Valued Subjects

Subjects considered most important to students are clearly and universally in the areas of biblical and theological knowledge. However, there are some interesting variations revealed according to the ecclesial tradition of the students. The following graph gives a snapshot of what the students have reported. (Catholic numbers beyond the universities are too small to include at this stage.)



Should transformative development be

- allowed
- fostered
- or strategized?

(How) should schools support personal struggles?

### Emergent Themes

- Cognitive aspirations; (trans)formative experiences
- Pivotal role of lecturer and theological community in transformative experiences
- Need of pastoral support throughout transformative experiences
- Issues of modern pedagogy

## Emergent Challenges

- How can students' prior life experience be used as an enrichment springboard for theological studies?
- How can integration of contemporary life situations be expanded beyond the currently dominant preparation for professional ministry?
- How can the role of the theological community be used more strategically in such integration?

## Still to Come

- Stakeholder Interviews September-October 2011
  - 2 Faculty
  - Academic Board Chair/Dean of School
  - Church Leaders/Employers
  - Graduate
- Workshop
  - April 2012
  - Dissemination of Findings
  - Articulation of Best Practices
    - Or Good Practices in Various Contexts

## Communications

- Project Leader: Professor Paul Beirne  
Melbourne College of Divinity  
21 Highbury Grove KEW VIC 3101  
Phone: (03) 9853 3177; Email: [admin@mcd.edu.au](mailto:admin@mcd.edu.au)
- Project Manager: Dr Les Ball  
33 Cooradilla Street JINDALEE QLD 4074  
Phone: 0448 143 778; Email: [les.j.ball@gmail.com](mailto:les.j.ball@gmail.com)
- Website: <http://web.me.com/anzcdt>
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