

2014 Report from the Chair of the Board

On YIRSP becoming a Research Institute of the University of Divinity

My 2013 report to the Board began ‘This year we have pursued the goal of becoming a research institute of the University of Divinity. All indications are that this has been agreed and as I write we are expecting to hear that this had been officially confirmed.’

As it turned out our long term hope to become a research institute of the University of Divinity (UoD) was dealt an unexpected shock when half way through 2014 the Vice Chancellor (VC) Professor Peter Sherlock indicated that the University would not proceed to authorise YIRSP as an institute of the UoD. This was a decision of the Committee of Governance of the University. The issue was that the Constitution of the UoD only allowed for Colleges and that Council having just settled many matters to do with the Constitution was not disposed to open up a raft of new issues that would involve a change in the Constitution. This was a surprise for the Board. Nothing like this had arisen in our previous conversations.

The VC was at pains to stress that there was very good will towards YIRSP, and that this response was no reflection on what YIRSP was doing nor on the quality of the research it had produced. We received the following comment from the VC:

A key question for the University is what sort of relationship the Institute wants, and whether the University Council is interested in a particular form of relationship. The direction of all similar conversations is heading towards such relationships being contracted through a particular College where the institutional relationships are strategic. My impression is there is not much appetite for the Council taking direct control or establishing institutes, partly due to our low resource base.

This was followed by an invitation for Bruce and myself to meet directly with the Governance Committee of the UoD to discuss these matters on the 17 November.

The Board’s response covered several matters. One was to initiate a process for the Institute to gain DGR status in its own right. Inquiries were initiated by Bruce Duncan and Brad Hasle and eventually we decided to go with legal help provided by Mr Tony French. As it turned out we were advised that the best approach was to have this matter introduced into the State Parliament. Anna Burke kindly agreed to do discuss this with us. We also began conversations with Dr Chris Monaghan, the President of the YTU Council, to discuss the above advice from the VC.

As well, we considered approaching other Colleges with a view to eventually establishing a relationship (e.g. a letter of agreement) with other Colleges of the University of Divinity. Eventually this led to inviting the heads of colleges or their nominees to a dinner at the Centre for Theology and Ministry on 13 November, which was hosted by Bruce and myself – see below for what we gained from the discussions during this dinner.

Other Board considerations in response to these developments were as follows:

- developing (5 year) pilot project with YIRSP as a research institute of the UoD to demonstrate the advantages of an institute such as ours in promoting the research aims of the Colleges. These could be evaluated later by the UoD, as an aid to it developing a strategic framework for other institutes;
- the need for the Board to highlight what we offer the Colleges:
 - support for their research interests and social engagement
 - capacity to find well qualified researchers with a grounded faith
 - supervision of projects by experts in various areas
 - editing and guidance to publication;
- the need for a wider conversation about mutual benefits, and specifically how YIRSP can promote the goals of YTU and the UoD as a whole, and how they can support YIRSP;
- the need for the Board to become clear on whether it is aiming to become wholly ‘owned’ and appointed by the University, or remaining an incorporated body with less formal connections to the UoD.

All of these considerations were very helpful in the course of the developing conversations with Heads of Colleges and with the Governance Committee of the University Council. On our discussion of the last of the above points I can’t find any comment in the minutes. My fallible recollection is that the Board was clear that our hope to become a research institute of the UoD would entail a significant shift in who ‘owns’ YIRSP in favour of the UoD.

The dinner with six heads of Colleges, with apologies from the other three heads, was very successful. This was greatly assisted by two things. One was the excellent launch by the VC on 5 November (see Appendix) in the same CTM location of YIRSP’s latest publication, *Social Justice and the Churches: Challenges and Responsibilities*, edited by John D’Arcy May (ATF Press, Adelaide, 2014), which offered an example of a key point in the VC’s address – presenting one clear answer to the question as to the benefit of the UoD to the wider public.

Another was the concise ‘hand out’ prepared by Bruce in consultation with Board members and sent to heads of Colleges before the dinner. (See Appendix.) The heads all expressed immense good will towards YIRSP and our hopes. Immediately some strong points were made to us, all of which condensed to the Colleges wanting representation on our Board if YIRSP was going to in any sense ‘wear’ their logos. In fact we were seen as asking very little of the Colleges. We naturally welcomed this line of thought while pointing out that when Bruce and I visited all the Colleges in 2013 only the Salvation Army took up our invitation to have a representative on our Board in the person of Captain Brad Hasle. By this stage there was an enjoyable warm glow to the discussion!

Bruce and I also made the point that YIRSP could offer ways of addressing two issues that were identified by the VC at the launch on 5 November: what is the benefit from the University of

Divinity to the wider public; what interfaith connections were being pursued. This was well accepted, but led to the comment that what we were seeking would clearly benefit the UoD and YIRSP, but it was not at all clear what would be the benefit to the Colleges. We agreed with this observation (the second point above notwithstanding) and agreed also to give it more thought. In the following discussion two examples were: the link between spirituality and social justice; initiating a graduate certificate in social justice – in conjunction with two or three of the Colleges.

As it happened Bruce and I received the following note on 7 November from the VC about the forthcoming meeting with the Governance Committee:

I am looking forward to seeing you and Stephen at the meeting of the Governance Committee on Monday 17 November at 9.30am at Graeme Blackman's residence in the Westin Hotel. This is really to bring you both into direct conversation with the governance structures of the university. One possibility we have canvassed is simply constituting the Yarra Institute as a centre of the University, but we can talk more about this on the day.

This was a sensational development. We could only devoutly speculate as to how this had come about. We decided not to alert the Heads of Colleges to this development prior to our dinner as we really didn't know where it would lead, though we had our hopes. We will follow up with the Heads of Colleges after this AGM.

The meeting with the Governance Committee on 17 November went very well as indicated by the summary below provided by the VC. Governance Committee members present: Graeme Blackman (Chancellor), Andrew Menzies (Deputy Chancellor), Peter Sherlock (Vice-Chancellor), Bill Uren sj (Council member) and Jeff Reaney (Director of Administration). The Yarra Institute was represented by Stephen Ames and Bruce Duncan.

The Vice-Chancellor (VC) explained that the University is considering the possibility of creating 'Centres' of the university to pursue a variety of interests and this might provide a model for the future of the Yarra Institute. Such Centres could be established by the University Council through its Regulations. The purpose of such Centres would be to foster activities across the University's Colleges, to drive strategic goals of the University, and to build partnerships between the Colleges and staff of the University, existing partners in the churches and religious orders and with new institutions such as government, other universities, and faith-based agencies. Activities would be focussed on research and public engagement, but might in time also include supporting and helping coordinate the research training and teaching activities of Colleges. The Council would have majority control over or outright ownership of any such Centres, which would enable the University to raise funds for its Centres through its DGR status and require such Centres to use the University's name and logo in all their activities.

Bruce and I expressed our great pleasure at this new possibility and the terms in which it is expressed, which is virtually what we had been seeking. In discussion we explained that our Board had

considered the issue of the University having a greater ownership of Yarra Institute, which was very much appreciated by the Committee. Another concern was the possibility of Colleges also wanting to set up centres on social justice. We said that there was no indication in our meetings with heads of Colleges in 2013 nor at our dinner that anyone was thinking in that direction. Rather those present were thinking of the Colleges having representatives on our Board. Secondly the VC said the University Council would not support the establishment of multiple centres for similar pursuits.

Yet another concern was about a Centre such as the Institute promoting views that might not be supported or endorsed by the University Council, such as the current debate on the deregulation of university fees. The VC pointed out that this would not be a problem provided such views were based on critical thought and research as the principle of academic freedom would apply, and while the Council would not necessarily endorse the views expressed by a College, Centre, or individual member of the University, it would uphold the importance of academic freedom and open debate.

This development accords with the direction we had always sought to pursue, initially with the MCD and then with the UoD. It seems clear that the VC has used a description of the role of the possible 'Centres' that coincides with the description of what we saw as the role of YIRSP as a research institute of the UoD. It is entirely likely that YIRSP will be the first such centre.

In the new year there will be an important discussion between the YIRSP Board and the UoD Governance Committee leading to a proposal to come to the Council of the UoD. I believe this will foreshadow some significant developments in the membership and operation of the Board. If all this finally comes about it will provide a far more secure basis for YIRSP continuing its work than continuing as an independent organisation; it will enhance our fund-raising capacities, contribute to our attracting PhD students, call us to a still higher level of functioning and provide a still more favourable context when eventually we need to see a new executive director.

The publications launched this year

Dr John Henley launched *A World United or a World Exploited, Christian Perspectives on Globalisation*, edited by Peter Price (ATF Press, Adelaide, 2013) on 20 June, and the first part of his address is on the Youtube clip on the SPC site. On 5 November Professor Peter Sherlock launched *Social Justice and the Churches: Challenges and Responsibilities*. His address is appended to this report.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the members of the Board for excellent discussions at our meetings and their other efforts to forward the objectives of YIRSP. On behalf of the Board I thankfully acknowledge the work of Peter Price and John D'Arcy May in editing of the two volumes launched this year. We were all very thankful for Jim D'Orsa's recovery from a serious operation earlier this year. Lastly, on behalf of the Board may I thank Bruce Duncan for his leadership and scholarly resources as well as administrative labours, without which YIRSP would just be a good idea.

Rev Dr Stephen Ames

Chair of the Board for the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy.