

## **The Idea of a Catholic University in Queensland**



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## The Idea of a Catholic University in Queensland

Universities, along with the churches, are the longest living institutions in our culture and society. A thousand years of learning, scholarship, research, disputation, scientific endeavor and recent mass access to higher education on a global scale have endowed us with ‘riches’ beyond avarice. When the Australian Catholic University (ACU) was formed a mere twenty-seven years ago it set out to do and be something different to the other three universities in Brisbane. The late Queensland Bishop Michael Putney summed it up succinctly when he helped me craft the 2012 – 2020 ACU Brisbane Campus Masterplan<sup>1</sup>:

*If a student cannot complete the statement ‘I graduated from ACU (Brisbane) which distinguishes me from graduates of other universities because...’ then the University has failed”*

There are many starting points and emphases for the idea of a Catholic University in Brisbane, all of which are surely valid. However, the late Bishop Michael Putney’s insight highlights the desire for the University to adopt a strategy that contributes to genuine diversity in the higher education sector in Australia. In order to be successful the University set out to do two things really well – to be great at being Catholic and to be great at being a university – setting a path of genuine distinction within the sector from its beginning for its graduating students.<sup>2</sup> It is all too easy to argue success or failure in terms of student numbers - which never really tells the whole story - however it is a fact that over its relatively short history ACU Brisbane has grown to become Queensland’s fastest growing campus with more than 5 000 full time equivalent students (fte) and five hundred staff. It would be a mistake to think that the current success of the campus in attracting students was always going to happen. In-fact, it was more likely not to happen in the first half of ACU Brisbane’s existence. Ten years ago ACU was seen as a marginal player in Brisbane and was widely regarded by many university campus leaders across the State (myself included) to be the campus least likely to succeed amongst its ‘sister’ sites run by fellow Queensland universities. Whilst many of these university sites across Brisbane have either stalled, shut down, been sold off or gone backwards, ACU Brisbane has more than doubled in size, achieving viability as a university campus in its own right through the hard-won insights

gained over many years of effort and managerial struggle by an academic community committed to forging their distinctive and diverse reputation amongst a fiercely discerning student body.



*Figure 1 Aerial view of the Australian Catholic University's thriving McAuley at Banyo campus*

ACU's distinctive approach and ethos is grounded within a rich intellectual tradition that spans more than two thousand years. A faith-based university that is open to all faiths and those of no faith can lead to the best of human values of concern for the less well-off, for tolerance, for understanding and the search for truth and justice and respect for the dignity of all human beings. This is not easy in a 'liberalised and marketised' world however it is worth the struggle to make it so as part of the University's distinctive mission to serve the common good in the context of a Catholic culture that seeks to encourage the development of the whole person – their mind, body and spirit. This approach to higher education is grounded in a rich intellectual, philosophical and theological tradition that was instrumental in shaping the idea of a Western university from its inception. These days academics who find themselves at odds with the ethos or truths of a defined Catholic university are not that different to those who may take issue with the vision of a secular university that may have a particular social or political leaning. However, where no university can modify its mission is in its pursuit of truth (however inconvenient) and defense of academic freedom – twin pillars of ACU as highlighted by its University motto *truth in love*.<sup>2</sup> This approach to the historical struggle for Catholic higher education in Brisbane predates the establishment of ACU, having its roots in the mid-1800s when religious orders and institutes

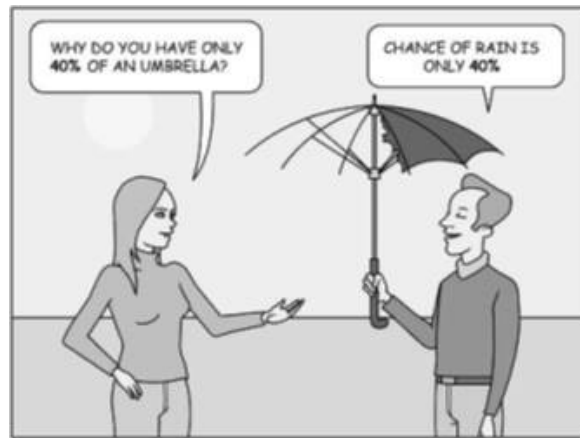
became involved in preparing teachers for Catholic schools and, later, nurses for Catholic hospitals.<sup>3</sup> An historical milestone of Catholic higher education in Queensland dates back to 1955 when McAuley College (named after Catherine McAuley the Irish Founder of the Mercy Order) was formed by the Sisters of Mercy to support their own preparation and development to teach in Catholic schools. The College, initially based at All Hallows Sisters of Mercy Convent in Brisbane, enrolled its first two students in that year and soon grew in number as a result of extending its intake to include members of other religious orders. This recruitment strategy was further extended in 1973 when lay-students were admitted to the College. The College moved to Dutton Park in 1976 and then to Mitchelton at the end of 1984 to accommodate increased growth aspirations especially when tertiary training for nurses was introduced by the government. Recognition through State government accreditation of courses, national registration of awards and Federal funding as a non-government teachers' college were significant developments in McAuley College's establishment as a Catholic Institute of Higher Education in Queensland. The Australian Catholic University was created in January 1991 when McAuley amalgamated with three other nation-wide Colleges – namely, the Catholic College of Education Sydney in New South Wales, the Institute of Catholic Education in Victoria and the Signadou College of Education in the Australian Capital Territory.

ACU Brisbane started life as a University in the suburb of Mitchelton with only tens of staff, hundreds of students and thousands of kilometers between it and its new sister campuses across three Australian States and one Territory. Amalgamation of Catholic Colleges across the country had been the only way for ACU to achieve university status. This fact was confirmed to me by the Hon John Dawkins, the great education reformer, who was the Education Minister responsible for setting the policy parameters that enabled many stakeholders to create ACU. Dawkins was ruthless in his definition of a university in terms of student numbers. I had the opportunity to chat to him about ACU's formation at the University's 25<sup>th</sup> Year Anniversary Celebration Dinner a few years ago, when he explained to me that that under his reforms university status could only be awarded where a higher education institution had attained a minimum of 5 000 students (fte). In ACU's case this could only be achieved by adding together the sum of students at Colleges in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and Brisbane – hence the need



for merger. This year, ACU Brisbane has exceeded 5 000 students (fte) in its own right, doffing its cap to those great education reformers and visionaries of their time, such as Dawkins. Uniquely, ACU had been set up as a ‘company incorporated’ which enabled it to operate across a number of States, avoiding the likelihood of Federal/State legislative conflict and delay. Although ownership was in the form of a company structure, the university had been formed as a public institution and management of the University was through its Senate which had external representatives from each State and Territory where the University had established a campus (including Queensland). As a public university ACU is responsible and accountable to government like any other publicly funded university, however it also represents a distinct intellectual tradition and educational mission. In this sense, it is able to genuinely contribute to an agenda of diversity within the sector - consistently called for by successive Australian national governments in recent decades.

The new University was originally formed with three Faculties – Health Sciences, Education and Arts, and Sciences. In recent years this academic structure has expanded then contracted, morphing into the current four Faculties - Health Sciences; Education and Arts; Theology and Philosophy; and Law and Business. These Faculties operate across seven major domestic campuses in Australia and a new international Centre in Rome. As a comprehensive campus and the second largest in the University, ACU Brisbane offers programs from all Faculties and their inherent Schools. The campus is also home to many service key areas with national responsibility such as the Office of Planning and Statistical Management (OPSM), which is headquartered on the Brisbane campus. Queensland may be beautiful one day and perfect the next however it can be tempestuous on the next but one day. Assessing and managing risk posed by extreme weather events to the Brisbane campus is a key part of OPSM’s role, which they approach with a good deal of humor (as evidenced by the recent circular from their office, below):



*Figure 2: Australian Catholic University's Office of Planning and Statistical Management recent circular*

ACU's first home was in the suburb of Mitchelton where the Sisters of Mercy had previously opened McAuley College in 1985, on land owned by the Archdiocese. Following conferment of university status, the campus affectionately became known as 'Mitchie' to the strongly bonded academic community who engaged in a whole range of social activities including the annual skit 'McAuley Mischief.' This example typifies the academic community's commitment to place however university leaders always knew they would have to move their Brisbane operation to a different site in order to transform the University campus into a world class setting. In 1998 ACU's Vice Chancellor Professor Peter Sheehan welcomed the proposition by the Archbishop of Brisbane and the Bishops of Queensland that the University should move to the old Seminary site in Banyo, which emerged as an option for the Catholic University following a marked decline in the recruitment of trainee priests. Both sides of government at Local, State and Federal levels were attracted to the idea – the Premier of Queensland, the Hon Peter Beattie, formally opening the new campus in 2003. In launching the new university campus Premier Beattie enthusiastically forecast that student numbers would likely double to 5 000 by 2020, quipping that in expressing this aspiration he may be accused of having a 'conflict of interest' as his wife worked at ACU at the time! It is fair to say that the majority of local staff in attendance were somewhat less enthused given their fondness for 'Mitchie' which they observed being sold off for \$6.5 million to Adriane Australia/Watpac for residential development.



Figure 3: McAuley College opened on the Dutton Park site in 1976, operating out of St Ursula's College within the Catholic Education Centre



Figure 4: McAuley College moved to the more spacious Mitchelton campus at the end of 1984, which became a university site in 1991

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Figure 5: Australian Catholic University's 'Mitchie' campus For Sale sign, signaling the move by the University to the new campus in Banyo

It is worth noting that Brisbane's newest university campus shares a common history with its oldest university site, establishing a legacy of iconic heritage university buildings positioned east and west of the city. The design and construction of the heritage buildings that form ACU Brisbane's Community Court were created by the same architect that built The University of Queensland's Great Court – Jack F Hennessy. It is generally believed that Archbishop James Duhig, who affectionately became known as 'James the Builder,' had been instrumental in commissioning both projects in the 1930s - awarding Hennessy the contract to build the original Pius XII Seminary buildings at Banyo; and reportedly influencing Premier William Forgan Smith's decision to appoint Hennessy to construct UQ's Great Court at St. Lucia.<sup>4</sup> Today, the quality of architecture, design, building and building materials (including high grade sandstone and benedict stone) provides a sense of gravitas for visitors to each campus.

The contract that brought University and Church closer together in terms of place in Banyo more than sixty years later was signed on the 29 February 2000. A Relationship Deed - Banyo Land Cyprés Scheme – was signed between the Corporation of the Trustees of the Roman Catholic Queensland Regional Seminary and Australian Catholic University Limited to allow the University to use the Banyo site to establish and commence operations consistent with a Catholic university. The Brisbane Campus (officially named McAuley at Banyo) commenced operation in 2003, replacing the former Brisbane Campus at Mitchelton. With 40 landscaped hectares, the Brisbane Campus embarked upon a major building program, offering students new university facilities including a state-of-the-art library, lecture theatres, seminar and tutorial rooms, science and nursing laboratories, improved computer facilities, music rooms, drama teaching spaces and visual arts facilities, as well as a swimming pool and other sporting facilities.

The new University campus had a deep indigenous history that complimented its more recent Catholic history as a premier site for learning. Originally known as 'Beehive Hill' to the local aboriginal population, the site had a ceremonial bora ring adjacent to its northern boundary. Beehive Hill was known to be a key meeting place for Elders from across Queensland and Northern New South Wales who would come together and gather on the site prior to conducting initiation ceremonies at the local Bora Ring. The land was acquired by the Catholic Diocese of Brisbane in 1863 and in 1939 the five Catholic dioceses of Queensland decided to build a



regional seminary on the site for the training of diocesan priests for the State.<sup>5</sup> The Banyo Seminary website acknowledges the important role Beehive Hill played as a meeting place for indigenous communities over the millennia. More than seventy five years after acquiring the land, the Foundation Stone of the former Pope Pius XII Seminary was laid on 19 November 1939, triggering the commencement of some of Brisbane's most spectacular heritage buildings.<sup>5</sup> The 40-hectare University campus has always been a site for learning and reflection with a rich indigenous history extending back tens of thousands of years, complimented by a more recent Catholic history spanning hundreds of years. As you walk across the site you feel a sense of serenity and providence that many believe has as much to do with its rich history as it does its elevation, landscape, architecture and design. It is a treasured site.

I was given the great privilege of becoming ACU Brisbane's second Associate Vice-Chancellor in 2011 - a role specifically designed to develop the campus with a direct reporting line to the Vice-Chancellor and President (VC&P). Under the current VC&P, Professor Greg Craven AO, the campus had blossomed as a result of the introduction of a broad range of programs in response to the Federal Government's demand driven higher education system introduced in 2008. New courses offered at Banyo include Exercise Science, Physiotherapy, Paramedicine, Psychology, Speech Pathology, Occupational Therapy and soon to be Law. My first job upon arrival was to author a new Master Plan for the campus ensuring the site continued to harvest the benefits of creating the space, imagination and organisation to make a modern university with traditional values work in the interests of the broad masses of people who saw higher education as their way to a decent and secure future.

The Master Plan has successfully steered the site to become, in my opinion, one of the finest university campuses in Australia creating an effective learning environment for students and staff who appreciate the mix of modern and traditional buildings developed in a way that protects and enhances vistas, views and gardens as well as creates a real sense of culture and community. But what did the students think of it? Dawkins' was right to insist on a quantitative benchmark to try and ensure a strong, vibrant and viable university student community when awarding university status however it was equally important to take a qualitative approach designed to

capture a deeper understanding of the student voice. Below is a snapshot of student perceptions of Brisbane's fourth university<sup>6</sup>:

*“I chose ACU because it has a strong religious vibe and there's a sense of community and compassion... a Catholic ethos that supports the community (and students) that are going out with an open mind and heart into their chosen profession”*

*“... some of the religious aspects of ACU (have) been positive for me ... making me more mindful and caring about others”*

*“... working online (the) majority of us don't like it but being older I don't find it particularly helpful in my learning. Younger students will find it more helpful ...but I like to talk face-to-face with a lecturer and receive feedback”*

*“Uni has helped me develop empathy and awareness of others”*

*“Ten years ago ...you could have walked straight into a job... it is harder these days”*

*“...uni teaches you how to handle yourself ... I now know how to make myself come across as someone they want to hire”*

*“...I love the campus, it has beautiful views, the facilities are fantastic... the new building is like a shining new light”.*



*Figure 6: The iconic heritage Banyo Campus buildings are reflected on the facade of the new Saint John Paul II Building which completes the University's Community Court – receiving the International Excellence in Architecture Merit Award from the Society of Colleges and Universities Planning and American Institute of Architects in 2016*

The ‘shining new light’ building referred to by the last student quote refers to the Saint John Paul II building which was launched as part of ACU Brisbane’s celebration of the University’s 25th Year Anniversary, and sought to complete Hennessy and Duhig’s original vision for the site to have a ‘mini Courtyard.’ The iconic heritage Banyo campus buildings are reflected on the facade of this building, creating the University’s Community Court. And if you gaze deeply into the mirrored glass and reflect back to 1941 you may well imagine the nods of approval from the original architects, acknowledging the University’s valiant efforts to harmoniously merge old buildings with new ones in order to create the originally envisioned Courtyard space. The concept of marrying traditional and modern forms, be they buildings or values, as a cultural project, is succinctly expressed by the words of Saint John XXIII, which adorn the entrance to the Saint John Paul II building:

*“The Church should never depart from the Sacred treasure of truth inherited from the Fathers. But at the same time she must ever look to the present, to the new conditions and the new forms of life introduced into the modern world.”<sup>7</sup>*

As well as high quality facilities, students at ACU Brisbane have firm expectations of what their studies will provide. They place a high value on their lecturers’ expertise, subject specialisms and professional practice. Many study programs are geared to serve future professional needs and students recognise and seek such experience and consider it highly relevant to their futures. By way of example, if you wander through Brisbane’s Southbank area you will see a new ACU building connected to the Mater Health precinct, complimented by its research lab in the Mater itself. ACU Brisbane has invested in Clinical Schools across the State that are designed to immerse Health students in experiential learning as part of their program. These facilities represent innovative university spaces connected to working hospitals, giving credence to the idea that real and relevant learning may not necessarily happen exclusively at the University campus, nor only in the world of work – but rather, where the two come together?

There are many published examples of ACU Brisbane’s innovation in curriculum as the University’s innovative investment in off-campus facilities. Two of ACU’s flagship programs that define the University’s commitment to serving the common good are Clemente Australia and the Core Curriculum. Clemente Australia<sup>8</sup> is a ground-breaking program pioneered by ACU

that provides people experiencing multiple disadvantages, including poverty and homelessness, with the opportunity to undertake tertiary study. Founded on Earl Shorris's Clemente Program in the USA, Clemente Australia is now in its 13th year and aims to reconnect vulnerable people with mainstream society.<sup>9</sup> The program offers university level education in community locations with small class sizes. It is offered in partnership with community agencies, providing participants with social support while they undertake their studies. It is one of the most transformational university programs in Australia. Similarly, the university's core curriculum, which is common to all undergraduate programs, is a pioneering development which aims to teach students to think critically and to be guided by social justice principles in their personal and professional lives. Its objective is to provide students with common learning experiences that enable them to assess their own experience in relation to current social issues in order to develop their humanism.

Universities *should* be concerned about developing the character of their students as well as their knowledge content in order to prepare them as best they can for an uncertain world where graduates can expect to have seventeen jobs across five different careers. In this context, the new learning at ACU stresses the equality of the instrumentalist world of professional practice alongside the need for belonging, connectedness, for self-esteem and personal autonomy. In such a way personal fulfilment in and through learning can be commensurate with progressive social and community life. These are the hallmarks that shape the distinctive approach and ethos of the Australian Catholic University in Brisbane. Discerning students understand this which is why Premier Beattie's seemingly over-ambitious prediction that the Banyo campus would double its student number by 2020 has been exceeded two years ahead of forecast. The reason for this early success provides an answer to the conundrum posed at the start of this chapter by the late Queensland Bishop Michael Putney. ACU Brisbane offers its students more than just a brighter career plan. What distinguishes ACU graduates from graduates of other universities is the rich and distinctive values proposition that defines and shapes their very humanism, and enables them to have real impact (through empathy) on their chosen profession and society more generally.

## Endnotes

1. The late Bishop Michael Putney's quote is the opening to the ACU Brisbane campus Masterplan which has guided the development of the University site over the last seven years. ACU Brisbane Campus Masterplan. Australian Catholic University Volume 1 Master Plan. 31<sup>st</sup> July, 2012, p.1
2. The notion of the need for ACU to guard academic freedom, to pursue truth (however inconvenient) and do only two things supremely well (i.e. be supremely good at being Catholic and supremely good at being a university) is articulated in detail by Professor Greg Craven in his Inaugural Lecture *The Idea of an Australian Catholic University* on 22 May 2008. It aptly describes the efforts of all three ACU Vice-Chancellors and can be found at [www.acu.edu.au](http://www.acu.edu.au)
3. The acclaimed historian John Hirst gives a detailed account of the contribution of the religious orders who were instrumental in establishing ACU in his commemorative book, Hirst, John. (2015) *Australia's Catholic University: the first twenty-five years*. Australian Catholic University.
4. John East gives a sound account of the role of Archbishop James Duhig and Jack Hennessy in creating UQ's Great Court and ACU's Pius XII buildings in Jack F Hennessy, architect of the Great Court at The University of Queensland. John East. Fryer Folios |Vol 9, Issue 1. August 2014. Pp15-19 University of Queensland.
5. The building of the Foundation Stone of the former Pope Pius XII is referenced on the Queensland Government site. Queensland WWII Historic Places. Pius XII Seminary Observation Post. Australian Catholic University Banyo campus. [www.WW2places.qld.gov.au](http://www.WW2places.qld.gov.au)
6. An internal research report, Real learning in the changing university - towards a new university curriculum. Internal Research Report. The Australian Catholic University, 2016 – captured student views of their campus.
7. The Saint John Paul II Building contain the words of Saint John XXIII's Opening address to the Second Vatican Council. [www.catholicculture.org](http://www.catholicculture.org)
8. Professor Jude Butcher pioneered the Clemente program in Australia and his article detailing the impact of this program can be found in Butcher, J. et al 2010. Social



Inclusion through Transformative Education: The Catalyst Clemente Program. The Australian Journal of University-Community Engagement. Vol 5, pp 49-66

9. The late Earl Shorris and his groundbreaking program tackling disadvantage is remembered at the following link [www.clementecourse.org](http://www.clementecourse.org)