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## ACU and the demise of the Catholic university

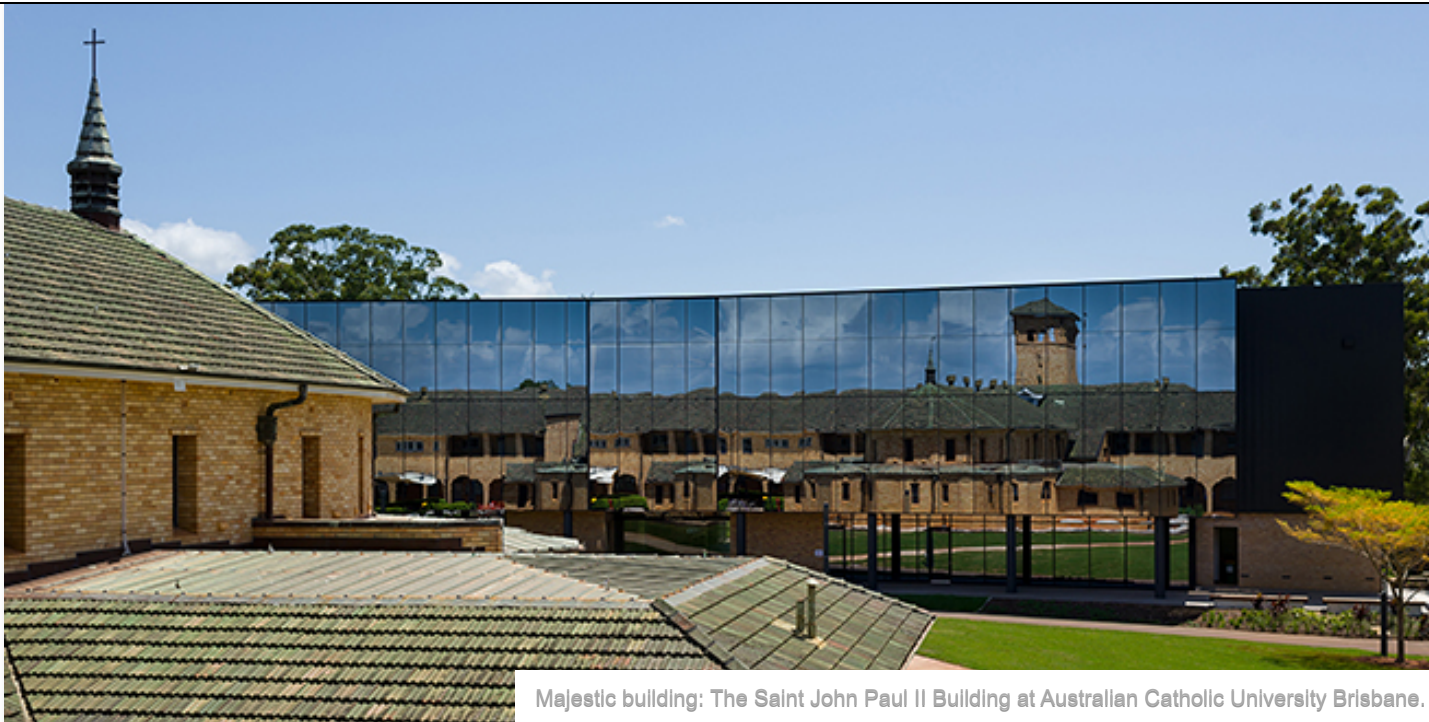
by **GUEST CONTRIBUTOR** — 19 September 2023 Reading Time: 5 mins read

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**By Dr Miles Pattenden**

LAST week, my employer, the Australian Catholic University, told us that it was to cut 32 full-time posts in humanities.

Theology, Philosophy, and History are especially affected. Thanks to further retirements in coming years and the non-renewal of fixed-term posts many other posts will go.

This is a catastrophe for Catholic education in Australia and a humiliation for those who have supported it over so many decades.

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ACU Vice-Chancellor Zlatko Skribis has justified the cuts by pointing to the university finances.



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Nevertheless, significant questions need to be asked of his management of them.

How, for instance, did he turn budget surpluses in the last years of former Vice-Chancellor Greg Craven's tenure into a projected deficit of \$30 million this year?

Academic staff are the immediate losers in all this – and the cruelty of what is proposed is heart-breaking.

Many colleagues were recruited by ACU management within the past five years, often from overseas.

They gave up tenured positions elsewhere to come to ACU.

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Now they and the families they brought over, face being left destitute.

Students also lose out from this plan in a major way.

Many staff being made redundant are dedicated teachers with vast experience.

That will be lost to those who are completing their degree programmes and those who are about to enrol.

Tellingly, ACU management did not consult with any of us or seek alternative ways to reduce budgetary deficits before wielding this bluntest of axes.

ACU's present course of action will do wider damage across the whole of Australian society.

Catholics should be particularly concerned by the reputational hit it inflicts on our prestigious educational systems across the land.

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Which scholar of renown will ever sign a contract to come here again when they could be cut off in their prime without fair warning?

More than that, however, the work that I and many colleagues do contributing to Australian intellectual and public life will be gone.

We will no longer be able to explain Catholic belief and tradition to the wider public.

We will no longer be able to help Catholics themselves understand the complex histories of the Church's positions on key issues such as sin, sexuality, women, priests, or religious and political freedoms.

A Catholic university such as ACU ought to invest more and harder in Humanities than secular institutions.



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Man of faith: St John Henry Newman.

Humanities are the heart of the Catholic tradition as St John Henry Newman recognised in his seminal exposition of *[The Idea of a University](#)*.

Newman's ideas have been influential far beyond the Catholic world.

They are a shining example of what Catholics and our Church contribute to modern, liberal, Western societies.

For a Catholic University to turn its back on them – indeed to be sacking the very people within its ranks whose scholarship most embodies them – with so little forethought is deeply disturbing.

Part of what has gone wrong at ACU is undoubtedly a lack of focus and understanding of our core Catholic mission and values.

The management team responsible for this “change plan” includes no humanities scholars.

Zlato Skribis himself is a sociologist. Abid Khan and Chris Lonsdale, his leading deputies, are specialists in nanotechnology and sports science.

Their failure to understand the significance of Catholic belief in the university is evident throughout this change plan, most obviously in its treatment of my own Faculty of Theology.

The change plan erroneously describes theology itself as “religious studies”.

It labels me as an historian although the Catholic Church and its canon law recognise my

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These casual failures to respect Catholic belief, tradition, or canonical regulations, betray a wider malaise.

A 21st century Catholic university must work with the secular.

It must acknowledge the importance of research metrics, performance indicators, and funding requirements.

Those who have made decisions about our lives and futures repeatedly emphasise this.

But our technocratic non-Catholic managers must also recognise something in turn.

Truth – academic or theological – is difficult to quantify.

There is no limit test for its validity, no metric for its authenticity, no easy measure for its commercialisation.

A Catholic university, upholding the Catholic tradition, should understand this.

It should embrace all modes of truth-telling even those which cannot be easily displayed on spreadsheets.

Our faith's greatest contribution to society over centuries has been to show this in action.

To serve as a constant living reminder that some things are mysterious, that truth lies in both logics and beauty.

ACU's turmoil is an opportunity for us all to reflect on what education means to us and what





I will particularly miss the columns I've filed on how the Church in Australia and beyond is adapting to the strictures and preoccupations of the modern age.

I still believe this is valuable work on behalf of all Catholics.

Dr Miles Pattenden is Senior Research Fellow in Medieval and Early Modern Studies at ACU. He specialises in the history of the Catholic Church and his books include *Pius IV and the Fall of the Carafa* (Oxford University Press, 2013) and *Electing the Pope in Early Modern Italy, 1450-1700* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

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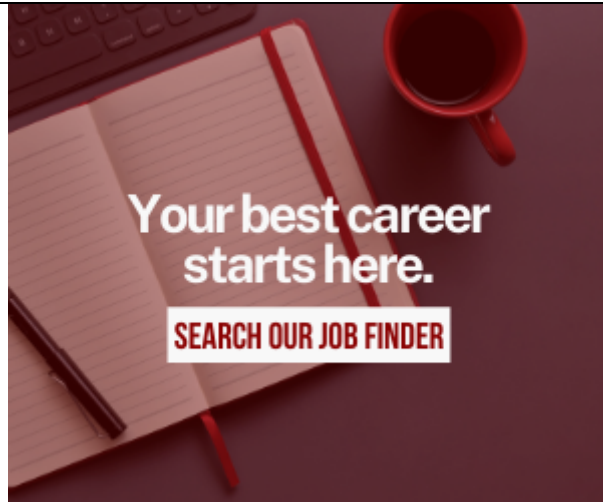
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