

THE ACADEMIC LIFE AND MISSION OF THE COLLEGE: (Draft – may 2007)

Where we have come over the last few years and where we might head over the next few years (in conjunction with the Master Plan)

A. Philosophy:

The College is committed to the academic enterprise within an approach to schooling that is holistic and formative in nature. We bring to this task the Jesuit tradition in education reaching back some 450 years, and lived out here at the College over the last 128 years. Ignatian educational philosophy and pedagogy, underpinned by Ignatian spirituality, lie at the heart of this educational tradition, and thus must inform the academic enterprise.

The academic programme offered at St Aloysius' is basically that of a liberal humanities orientated education. Subjects offered at St Aloysius' essentially reflect this programme: they are drawn from what might be termed the mainstream academic disciplines of English, Mathematics, Science, History and Economics/Geography, and from the creative arts (Music, Drama and Art). There is an emphasis also on Languages, including the requirement for an Asian language to be taught. PDHPE has also become a strongly performing part of our programme here, not inappropriately, given that a focus on the physical in education was first found in the early Jesuit schools. Subjects relating to IT and Technology are more recent additions to our programme. Together with Religious Studies, which is constitutive of our identity, these subjects form our academic curriculum, and through our enrolment procedures the students best able to take advantage of it.

Thus the College is academically selective primarily in the sense that our curriculum has a specific and limited character, and students are selected out through the examination because they would not cope with such a curriculum. Otherwise the entry examination is only one factor in the selection of students at enrolment.

With many education studies confirming the significance of school ethos or climate for academic achievement, and the significance of relationships, especially in the formation of boys in education, St Aloysius' places great importance on being an educational community, and on developing a strong relationship between staff and students that is personal, somewhat informal but always respectful. An emphasis is placed on the *cura personalis* of all members of the school community. The community aspect of our education also values and encourages the extraordinary high level of parental involvement across all areas of school life.

The academic curriculum itself remains the core of the wider school curriculum that includes the religious life of the school, its large and diverse co-curricular programme, and our commitment to the formation of our students as young men of competence, conscience and compassion.

B. Curriculum

Middle Schooling initiatives:

Over the last few years emphasis has been placed on developing a stronger Middle School curriculum, while not opting for a specific Middle School structure in the classic sense. The bigger Departments have Assistant Heads with a focus on curriculum in Years 7-9. Ms Suzanne Leahy's role as Assistant Director of Curriculum (Middle School) has brought new focus to programmes, assessment and study methods to Middle Year schooling. The new role of Year 7 Academic Coordinator, under Mrs Margaret Loomes, has complemented this approach and brought closer attention to issues of transition of students into High School. Some Department Heads will be asked to work more closely with the Junior School staff on strengthening the academic links between the two campuses.

Academic competition:

Academic competition, understood as students pushing each other to achieve their best, is an integral part of schooling at St Aloysius'. There is a pragmatic aspect to this focus: it helps prepares them for the HSC (and one might add, for the hard realities of life after school). In boys' education, healthy competition also provides an element of motivation. Additionally, the emphasis on competition meshes with our philosophy – competition can encourage students to strive to achieve their full potential, an aspect to the Jesuit tradition of the *magis*. The various state and national competitions (English, Mathematics, Chemistry, Computing etc) as well as State mandated testing (Ella, Snap, School Certificate and HSC), impact significantly on our academic programme. We are committed to maintaining a strong internal examination system across the school – Junior and Senior. Acknowledging academic excellence through the annual Prize-Giving Day remains a highlight of the school calendar. Departments are also encouraged to have internal challenges that combine competition with extension such as, the Matt Reilly Creative Writing competition and the Hopkins Reading Challenge in English.

Personal Bests:

Both the 2006 HSC and School Certificate results were the best results achieved by the College since both external examinations were revamped by the Government. There has been an improvement at the top end across all disciplines, but also a significant improvement has been achieved in reducing the number of Band 2 and 3 results. To ensure that we are not simply driven by league tables and results, and to complement the motivation provided by students competing with each other, we do need to develop further, a culture in which the focus is also on the student striving to achieve his best personal result, particularly for those boys of very considerable ability who know they can't top their classes but can sail fairly easily through their schooling with quite reasonable results. This year we will be looking at introducing an element to our reporting that reflects an emphasis on achieving one's personal best to complement the existing ranking against other students. Professor Andrew Martin's work in this area will be the starting point (A. Martin 2006 "Personal Bests: A proposed multidimensional model and empirical analysis" *British Journal of Educational Psychology*).

Gifted and Talented:

The issue of extending our brightest students through a Gifted and Talented programme needs continued reflection and work. Generally we have favoured an extension approach rather than acceleration, placing more importance on the formative/relational aspects of schooling over simple academic progress. In Mathematics, however, we have begun to look at acceleration within this subject area both in the Junior and Senior schools.

Ignatian Curriculum:

We need to continue to work at incorporating more specifically Ignatian elements in our teaching programmes. Mr Quentin Evans has begun work on this. Linked with this is the focus on 'backwards design' with its emphasis on the nature of assessment tasks and the holding of smaller meetings of teachers. Considering the amount of time and effort invested in examinations and reporting, sometimes assessment tasks themselves seem relatively under-prepared and thought out. 'Backwards Design' should complement the reflective element in Jesuit education. Our focus here is part of a wider Province initiative in this area.

Time during the teaching week is a precious commodity. We will try to ensure that meetings are more creative/teaching focused in professional learning teams, with administration done more electronically or at regular meetings at the beginning/end of terms. This year we are looking to trial with specific time-tabled meetings for professional learning teams (Year 7 Geography, Year 7 English, Years 7-8 Religion and Years 7-8 History), as well as encouraging such a development in the general time-tabled faculty meetings. In the Junior School, where Grade or KLA meetings can occur with smaller numbers, emphasis too should be placed on teaching curriculum rather than general administration.

Homework:

In recent years, the value of homework has been questioned in some quarters. I have asked the Boys' Education committee to review the literature on this and to bring to HODs some recommendations in this area. The growing focus on assessment tasks and across the year marking in earlier years of schooling is placing some pressure on the type of homework given. Further reflection in the Junior School about the nature of homework tasks may also be appropriate.

Study Methods:

Study methods also need to be an area of increased focus. In 2006 Ms Leahy and Mrs Loomes introduced Prue Salter and her seminars to large numbers of our parents and boys in Years 7-10, which has proved popular. Modifications may need to be made in accordance with our particular context, and a dialogue commenced within the school (for example discussions in the Boys' Education Committee). Whatever the particular methodology, there is a hunger amongst our families for a systematic approach of some sort. Developing a systematic approach to study that is suitable to our programme here at St Aloysius' will be a goal for the coming year. Some induction of staff in the coming year will be needed to complement the work with boys and parents – on the first Staff day in Term 2 Prue Salter held a session with Senior school staff.

Transition Education:

The introduction of students to High School in Year 7 is an important initiation both into the school community and into High School education. Along with the emphasis on renewing our Middle School curriculum, a refocusing on the Year 7 experience is important in ensuring that good foundations are laid. The move towards having a more specialist Year Coordinator position in Year 7, along with the appointment of a Year 7 Academic Coordinator to aid the transition process and to support the delivery of the curriculum, has the goal of enhancing the experience of transition for students, parents and staff alike. In line with the Master Plan we will aim to move to six homerooms with core teachers (up from five) in Year 7 as soon as space becomes available.

Junior School Literacy Plan:

In 2007 the Junior School is focusing on a literacy plan to provide a framework for further developing the English Curriculum in the Junior School. This focus will complement the substantial revision of the English programme in Years 7-9.

Year 9 as a Focus for further work:

Across the country, the Year 9 experience is often one marked by a sense of students standing still, boredom or wasted years, and schools are responding in various ways. We need to work at addressing this both in terms of curriculum and outside curriculum. New subjects such as Digital Media, Drama, Sports Science, etc have provided some opportunity for students to experience new challenges and to be more engaged. Outside the curriculum itself we will look at measures such as having a more distinct SRC for years 7-9, Middle School assemblies run by Year 9 and the like. The Nambucca Heads exchange is one example of something new being focused on this year. The implications of national testing at the end of Year 9 (2008) are still to be explored.

Year 10 Issues:

The outstanding results in the 2006 School Certificate appears to indicate progress in moving Year 10 to be more of a pre-HSC year. The initial trial of Accelerated Mathematics at the end of Year 10 appears to have gone well (combining Year 11 and 12 2-Unit Mathematics into one year, commencing in fourth term of Year 10). We are looking at the possibility of also doing this with PDHPE for those students who have completed Sports Science. There is also the possibility of introducing some Studies of Religion into the end of Year 10. The move to Year 10 sharing classroom space with Years 11 and 12 has gone pretty well. The curriculum implications of the abolition/downplaying of the School Certificate are still to be looked at. It may well open up possibilities for us by introducing more flexibility into Year 10.

Senior Classes:

As mentioned earlier, the 2006 HSC results saw continued improvement both at the top and bottom ends of the cohort. There has been some improved use of study periods by Year 12 which we need to sustain. As a result of an effective Learning Enrichment Department, there is a significant increase in special provisions for some of our students (without reaching the somewhat ridiculous proportions of some schools) – this has ensured a more level playing field for students compared to those in many other schools.

Implications of Changes to Tertiary Entrance:

A significant trend emerging across the State is the growing diversity of entry points into the tertiary sector. In addition to fee-paying entry, universities are offering more scholarships and are selecting students whose UAI may be lower than the cut-off but who are strong in particular subjects. There are also the various special access schemes. Other forms of early entry are emerging. There is some move towards a more American College style approach (Melbourne University is trialing this, and some others are doing this in the Health Sciences area. The implications of any Australian Certificate of Education for the HSC are still to be seen. Some universities are offering up to 5 UAI points for elite sport.

In turn some schools are seeing the International Baccalaureate as a way forward (eg, the introduction at Monte) and the Council's Academic Futures Committee will be examining it this year, though I would think it quite unlikely that we would consider it in the near future. My guess is that the HSC will become less important over time in terms of university admission and that universities will pursue still greater flexibility in Admissions policy. It is critical that our students and families are up to date with the possibilities and a strong Careers office with a particular focus on university entry has a key role to play – academically it can only be a help if students are clearer on their goals and motivation in this regard. It may be too, that the changing pattern of university admissions will favour our more holistic approach.

C. Overview of Classes:

In the last couple of years there have been some changes in the area of classes and the infrastructure underpinning the academic programme. Others will occur over the next couple of years, though some will depend on the space provided by the building associated with the Master Plan.

Years 3-4:

- We will move to two Year 3 classes of 23 and two Year 4 classes of 25 (dependant on gaining a room from Master Plan) – reducing class size, rather than increasing numbers.

Years 5-6:

- Continue four classes of 28 in each year (as in 2006)

Year 7

- In this important transition year we will aim for six homerooms of 24-5 (dependant somewhat on progress with the Master Plan)

Years 8-9

- We will achieve six streams in English and Mathematics within the next few years (we already have achieved 6 streams in Year 9 Maths)

Year 10

- Continue to focus on Year 10 as a pre-HSC year
- Year 10 share precinct with Years 11 and 12 (as over the last couple of years)
- 6 streams (largely achieved over last couple of years)

HSC

- need to continue to lift academic performance (trending in the right direction)

D. Master Plan as Impacting on the Academic Programme:

- we will continue to move towards having more specialist or teacher homerooms (History, Geography, Economics, Languages, Years 10-12 – Mathematics and English rooms are a start). The provision of a number of additional classrooms is integral to this goal.
- Refurbishment of Middle School rooms – aesthetics, technology, furniture – with capital budgeted for this
- Junior School extension to provide a classroom for an extra Year 3 class, a multi-purpose room with some capacity for Science, and Music practice rooms.
- In the main campus, Music and Drama will be consolidated on fourth/fifth and lower ground floors respectively.
- PDHPE to be based in the new stadium complex, with weights room and attached office and classrooms (one of which ideally should also be able to be used by Biology)
- Technology – electronic smart-boards and digital projectors rolled out across the school
- Technology room in present canteen (Canisius room becomes cafeteria) with hopefully a multi-purpose function as Year 7 or 8 Science laboratory classroom.

E. Our teaching staff

Whether teaching as a profession is practiced as a craft or a science or an art, it demands of the teacher a proficiency in the discipline in which he/she is engaged. The subject area should engage the teacher, and therefore engage the student. There is a commitment to knowing the material being taught, and an openness to learn more, whether it be to what is being taught or how it is being taught, which again models learning to the student. At St Aloysius we have a staff that does engage in professional development, and the College is committed to encouraging staff to undertake relevant professional development both through time release and financial support. There are teachers who pursue higher degrees in their area of teaching, and the College subsidises these studies. Many serve on Board of Studies committees preparing syllabi, setting examinations for the School Certificate and HSC, and marking the HSC. Increasingly teachers are improving their capabilities with technology so as to assist them in their task. New teachers are inducted in line with the requirements of the NSW Institute of Teachers.

Teaching at St Aloysius draws on the insights of Ignatian pedagogy and spirituality. Teachers are encouraged to introduce an element of reflection into their teaching. We seek to embed Ignatian spirituality and pedagogy in our curriculum and in our teaching practice. In 2007, following the Lorraine Ozar seminars we have created a number of learning teams across subjects in Years 7-8 where the emphasis in programmed regular meetings is on best teaching practice and group planning and reflection, rather than administration. Staff have numerous opportunities to take on more of the Ignatian educational and spiritual ethos: programmes offered by the Loyola Institute, the colloquium which is offered between a number of Sydney schools, pilgrimages, retreats, our own induction days.

Teaching at St Aloysius should reflect the element of pastoral pedagogy, that is, teaching that recognizes and addresses the emotional and social needs of students. It reflects something of the Ignatian sense of the importance of context and of the Ignatian emphasis on education as formation.

“Pastoral pedagogy implies that education is more than simply the transmission of curriculum content and the development of skills and competencies. It implies that although these are necessary conditions for quality pedagogy, they are not sufficient. Indeed, the research summarized above in relation to teacher-student relationships clearly shows that when the social and emotional needs of students are met, they are likely to be more engaged with the process of information and skill transmission”. (Dr A Martin, Measuring and Enhancing Student Motivation and Engagement, p.34)

Among the practices that Dr Martin identifies as being encompassed by pastoral pedagogy are: developing a sense of community amongst students; nurturing resilience in students through relational connectedness; being optimistic for students and aiming for mastery of skills and subject wherever possible; maintaining positive home-school links; and respecting, affirming, and getting to know students. In a school our size one of its strengths is that students are known. Teachers are constantly thrown into contact with the boys: in the classroom and in the yard, on the sporting field and on stage, on the parade ground, on camps and retreats, on tours. In the Junior school the home-room teacher plays a critical role in the education of the boys. In the Senior school most teachers also serve as tutors and coaches. The boys appreciate the generosity of teachers with their time. There is generally a very positive rapport between teachers and the boys. Constraints placed on teachers' time by growing bureaucratic loads and the expectations/pressures of achieving success should not be allowed to undermine the pastoral role of the teacher.

There are genuine concerns about teachers' pay. Here at the school we are grappling with these concerns. Our fees, quite deliberately, are not of the same magnitude as those of most comparable independent school, so as to maximise educational opportunities for as many as possible. This is even more true of the Catholic systemic schools. One measure that goes some way to rewarding effort is that of professional development, where teachers acquire further qualifications and skills relevant to their teaching (such as Masters degree), then the school assists in paying that cost, and salary scales may reflect something of such qualifications. Our co-curricular payment system seeks to reward the extra hours and talents employed by our staff in the sport, music, drama, debating, cadets and other areas of interaction with the boys. I think it is worth looking at creating a culture that encourages teachers to suggest or accept specific projects that add value to our educational offerings and which require greater commitment (research, time, energy etc) and which carry with them agreed upon bonuses. And there needs to be some form of differentiation of payment for teachers after the ten or so years in the profession that acknowledges ability, contribution, creativity and the like. But the challenge is that the measure of such achievement must be flexible and sensitive to the culture of the school. It will be a challenge for schools such as ours, but even more so for the State and Catholic systemic schools to allow the autonomy needed for schools to go down such a path. And it would be a shame if some of the bigger private schools accelerated their progress down such a path, not as pathfinders, but primarily out of self-interest to the detriment of the wider educational community.

F. Relationship to other areas of school life:

There are four areas of school life that together with the academic programme shape the nature of the College, and which have an impact on the academic life of the College within our commitment to holistic education:

1. We are a **Faith-based school:**

- Our academic programme includes a commitment to religious literacy and conveying a knowledge/familiarity of the tradition, as well as promoting the ability of our students to think ethically and to reflect intelligently on issues of justice and the common good.
- We seek to provide all students with significant experiences of liturgy, retreats and prayer, so nourishing their spiritual lives. The voluntary four-day Kairos retreats in holiday time, introduced in 2004, and held four times a year, and involving about one hundred of our senior students per annum, have become a very significant experience for many of our boys. The promotion of the Awareness Examen as a characteristic way of praying here, and the use of fallow time in the Junior School for the Examen (the Five Stars), have added to the spiritual life of the College. Classes should begin with prayer or a time for silent reflection. Liturgy continues to play a central role in College life. Emphasis on providing a quality liturgical experience that engages the boys as much as possible has a priority in the calendar. The role of the Music Department in supporting this has been a key resource.
- Mr Joe El-Khoury has been appointed the College's Coordinator for World Youth Day in 2008.

- The mission of the school includes the formation of ‘men for others’ as part of the Jesuit commitment to a faith that does justice. The Arrupe outreach programme in the Junior School has given clearer direction to the involvement of the boys in a faith and justice approach. The Nambucca Heads exchange hopefully will bring the school into greater contact with regional and indigenous Australia. The compulsory ‘faith and service’ programme will, over the next year, be moved from Year 11 to Year 10. The Philippines Immersion experience occurs twice a year. Its timing will move to the end of Year 10 and the middle of year 11 rather than the present timing of the middle of Year 11 and the end of Year 11. In part, both of these moves in time are aimed at lessening the time pressures in the last twelve months of a boy’s education here. The work of our Vinnies and Amnesty groups are also an important living out of what we teach.
- The growing involvement of students and recent old boys, along with families, staff and old boys in service and justice areas is a pleasing extension of the mission of the College: for example the Micronesia scholarship, other GAP placements, Nugacity, Life for Kids.

2. We aim here to provide effective **pastoral care of our students**, within an environment where every boy is known and valued. Such a priority relates to our mission of formation, but indirectly also affects our academic effectiveness. A sense of connectedness, of belonging, and the relationships that can develop in a school have been shown by numerous researchers to have significant impact on Academic performance. I find Professor Martin’s definition of pastoral pedagogy useful here (see page 5 of document).

The practices that are identified as being encompassed by pastoral pedagogy include developing a sense of community amongst students, nurturing their resilience through relational connectedness, being optimistic for students, maintaining positive home-school links, and respecting, affirming, and getting to know students. I would hope that this is a real feature of St Aloysius’ as a teaching and learning community.

- The Tutor system is integral to providing pastoral care in the High School. It has the positive role of bringing together students from across all six Year levels, and provides opportunities for Senior students to lead. Pastorally, the Tutor can be another significant adult in the student’s life at school. Some Tutor groups have also brought together families socially and liturgically.
- This year, building on some previous examples, the College will be asking some members of staff to be an academic mentor for a specific student (the student may be in their class, or Tutor group, or have a previous history with the student). The mentor would meet regularly with the student specifically about his academic progress.

3. **Discipline** is exercised within the parameters of the philosophy, tradition and ethos of the school. It is constitutive element of our pastoral care, and should not be thought as being opposed to it. There are a number of issues that we need to reflect on, some of which I have asked a discipline committee to report on later this year. All members of staff have a role to play in implementing discipline and all share a responsibility towards the boys and to their colleagues.

- The need to have procedural fairness in investigation and implementation of discipline is an area where we can expect increasing expectation from parents and society.
- As educators investing in the formation of the boys, a priority must be to inculcate personal responsibility and not simply control.
- Personal responsibility does include a clear sense that actions have consequences
- Another aim of discipline within the school is creating a climate of mutual respect
- While consistency and rules have value, priority is given to the individual’s circumstances and to a more personalized approach to implementing school rules.
- Compassion and gentleness should guide our dealings with the boys entrusted to our care.

- The continued development of student leadership roles (prefects, SRC) has a role to play in developing an educational environment in which our students are active partners.

4. **The Co-curricular programme** shapes much of the life of the school. Studies have shown a link between student academic performance and co-curricular involvement. Moreover, our focus on Cadets, Debating, Drama, Music and Sport reflects our commitment to holistic education. The commitment to excellence and the use of one's talents, an emphasis on involvement and team work, respecting one's body and fitness, the cultivation of the imaginative and the aesthetic, and the ability to articulate and express, are just some of the benefits to be gained from a vibrant co-curricular programme.

Teaching staff are required to participate in one semester or equivalent of co-curricular, as coaches, managers etc. The majority of teachers undertake more than one co-curricular involvement. In addition to the skills and talents that the staff brings to this involvement in the wider formation of the student, such involvement strengthens the relationship between students and teachers which is so important to us as an educational community.

Students are required to be involved in one summer and one winter sport, and are encouraged to participate in the wider co-curricular programme in music, drama, debating and public speaking, and cadets.

Fr Chris Middleton SJ

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