



National Institute for  
**CHRISTIAN EDUCATION**  
informing reforming transforming

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## Body of Knowledge

*This statement has been prepared by National Institute staff to represent the position of the National Institute and to the secular academic establishment.*

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### Structural Foundations

It was long thought that the body of human knowledge, particularly academic knowledge, rested on universal foundations of human reason that were common to all rational persons. Academic knowledge gained its coherence from this universal reason. With the collapse in the mid-twentieth century of the logical positivist enterprise that attempted to provide compelling logical proof of the validity of this belief (Suppe, 1977), all this changed. The world of scholarship was forced to accept the conclusion that the structural foundations that give coherence to the diversity of our knowledge are a network of beliefs about the fundamental nature of the world.

This is appropriately termed a worldview—*Weltanschauung*—(Suppe, 1977, Nord & Haynes, 1998) but can be identified by other terms. Rorty (1989), for example, identifies it in cultural terms, likening a culture to a walled enclosure constituting a closed belief framework that shapes the way we understand all we experience. He argues that we can escape this closed world only by finding cracks in the walls that give us footholds to climb up to gain a view of the world that transcends our cultural beliefs. Kuhn (1996) uses the term “paradigm.” Polanyi (1962) talks about interpretive frameworks.

This revolution in the understanding of the structural foundations of the body of knowledge ushered in what we call the postmodern age, where it is acceptable to use different belief networks, or worldviews, as the basis for giving a structural coherence to the diversity of knowledge. Scientists may still use a positivist framework, but they can claim no rational basis for insisting that this is the only valid framework. To give but one example, astrophysicist Roger Penrose (1989) of Oxford University, recently knighted for his contributions to science, says that he can only make sense of his groundbreaking work in mathematics by founding his science in a Platonic view of the world.

Feyerabend (1978) makes the point in very strong terms when he says that there is no rational basis for preferring science to magic. He is quick to add that he himself does

prefer science to magic, but that this preference cannot be decisively established by reason alone.

It is not surprising, then, that scholars from a wide range of backgrounds (Kok, 1998; Pearcey, 2004; Postman, 1995; Romanowski & Oldenski, 1998; Sergioivanni, 1999; Wolterstorff, 2002) remind us that even the ways we use words and phrases in educational activities reflect our beliefs about the nature and meaning of the world and its inhabitants. Definitions of the purpose of education that recognise its key task of nurturing and transferring or even transforming cultural norms also acknowledge that central to the nature of teaching and learning are the belief characteristics of teachers and education designers (Counts, 1952; Dewey, 1916; Spindler, 1987).

It has also been observed (Wentz, 1987; Nord & Haynes, 1998) that a fundamental religious conviction of some kind, whether explicit or implied, is the core of every worldview. This applies even to those who profess no religious faith since, as Wentz points out, the fundamental nature of religious faith is a conviction about the ultimate source of order and meaning in the world we experience. Hence, even the atheist will have some conviction about the nature of the world in which we live, albeit one that has no place for a divine being.

Many Christian educators welcome these developments (Edlin, 2003; Fowler, 1997; Greene, 1998; de Jong, 2001; Pazmiño, 1997; Plantinga, 2002; Smith & Shortt, 2002; van Dyk, 2000; van Brummelen, 2002; Vryhof, 2004; Belcher, 2005).

In line with these developments, National Institute courses are not to be understood as courses in "Christian" education any more than the Action Research model developed and taught to education students at Deakin University should be labelled "Neomarxist" education merely because it is developed from Habermas' Neomarxist worldview perspective (Habermas, 1973). A worldview is not a body of knowledge but a network of beliefs that provides a structural foundation for a body of knowledge that may draw on knowledge from a wide variety of sources. Though solidly rooted in, and deeply committed to, a Christian worldview, National Institute programs have an intellectual rigour and integrity which, accompanied by the high level of academic attainment of the National Institute's teaching and support staff, has given the National Institute widespread acceptance within the secular educational and regulatory communities.

In its courses, THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE affirms that best practice is to be aware and make use of knowledge based on a wide variety of worldview positions (Nord & Haynes, 1998; Ozman & Craver, 2003) that provide insights into the same realities and vocational categories as would occur in a similar course at other tertiary institutions. A dogmatic attitude that assumes the superiority of educational ideas and practices endorsed by Christian authority, or by any other authority, is discouraged as exhibiting poor scholarship. This is, however, a course in education that deliberately encourages students to develop an awareness of how a Christian worldview develops and functions. For this reason, all students are required to complete two core units which acquaint students with the foundational literature from which a Christian worldview perspective is derived. The units also are designed to provide an understanding of the nature and role of worldviews together with encouraging a critical evaluation of worldviews and their role in education.

This critical evaluation functions in two directions. The first direction is critical evaluation of the students' own worldviews to ensure consistency with their core faith. The second direction is the evaluation of educational theories and practices, including those endorsed as Christian, for consistency with the students' worldviews. Students are

encouraged to take on board this concept of critical evaluation as a continuing, life-long practice and not a once only exercise.

### **The Dynamic Character of Knowledge**

The idea of a fixed, static body of knowledge is rejected as untenable in the light of current perceptions of reality. New insights require modifications and even reversals of earlier knowledge. A significant example of this has been seen during the last century with the attempts by physicists to discover a “theory of everything”—an endeavour that has led them to move from Newtonian physics to Einstein’s Relativity then to Quantum Mechanics and now, in some circles, towards String Theory.

Other equally important examples include the recent identification by two Nobel prize winning Australian scientists of a specific bacterium as a major factor in peptic ulcers, with implications for stomach cancer (Normark, 2005). Any satisfactory worldview, therefore, must be open to modification and change in the light of this dynamic character of the body of knowledge. The religious conviction that is the core of the worldview will govern the exact way in which this worldview modification takes place. However a worldview governed by a rigidly fixed body of dogma—religious or otherwise—is entirely unsatisfactory, generating an obscurantism that leaves us locked within a world of unreality. The National Institute encourages students to recognise the value of a reformed critical realist approach (Edlin & Ireland, 2006) with its attendant perspective of epistemic humility (Langton, 2001).

The body of educational knowledge is no exception to this characteristic of dynamism. The recognition of the role of a Christian worldview by the National Institute, therefore, is not to be understood as the endorsing of a religious dogmatism. On the contrary, National Institute academic staff are continually exploring new insights into education that will throw fresh light on effective educational practice, regardless of the source of these insights. And students are encouraged to pursue a similar course, ready to modify their educational worldview as well as the wider worldview in ways that remain consistent with the core conviction that the God who is revealed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the focus and ultimate source of all order and meaning in the world of human experience.

On this basis, the National Institute has a distinctive position that does not distance it from, but positions it within, the educational mainstream engaged with the diversity of worldview positions within that world. When the role of worldviews is not recognised, educational discourse tends to be hindered by fruitless debate. When they are brought out into the open the possibility opens for productive dialogue between educators holding a diversity of worldview positions. It is this kind of dialogue that the National Institute seeks to generate, both in its own operations and in the professional lives of its students.

### **Learning and Teaching**

Having laid the structural foundations in the core units, students have the opportunity to explore the body of educational knowledge, in terms of both educational theory and practice, within four related but distinct learning tracks. The relation between theory and practice is not seen as a one-way relationship in which theory governs practice. Rather it is seen as an interactive relationship with theory providing insights for more effective educational practice while practice provides important empirical data that can be used to refine and enhance educational theory.

Teaching is not seen as a mere process of knowledge transmission but as a process that facilitates learning in order to equip students for life-long learning. Given the dynamic

nature of the body of knowledge, teaching in any field or discipline of knowledge can only be effective if the teacher is constantly keeping abreast of developments in that field of knowledge, as well as developments in the knowledge of educational practice.

An important component of this track is developing an understanding of the diversity of ways of learning. This includes the important issues of multiple intelligences and learning styles (Good & Brophy, 2002; Gardner, 1999; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999; Ozmon & Craver, 2003, Silver, 2000). We do not want to encourage an educational elitism by educational practices favouring students with one set of abilities or gifts. Our aim is to equip teachers to teach in ways that will give all an equal opportunity to learn in accordance with their individual abilities, styles and personalities. This is a major challenge but the understanding that has developed over recent years about the diversity of ways of learning and types of knowledge makes it an achievable goal.

Students are directed to and expected to demonstrate an understanding of contemporary educational trends in a way that critically reflects on their own teaching in the light of those trends and a Christian worldview position (Giles, 2005; Hull, 2003). For example, in the subject Issues in Teaching Mathematics, contemporary perspectives on mathematics are explored and applied in educational settings that resonate with a range of philosophical approaches to this aspect of reality, including Christian, empirical constructivist, and critical realist paradigms (Nickel, 1990; Good & Brophy, 2002; Howell & Bradley, 2001).

In this case, as in other disciplines, it is seen as important to anchor learning in the student's own concrete experience of the world in order to avoid the impression that the material being learned is mere abstractions detached from the concrete realities of daily life. Situated cognition is supported by sound research such as that of Saxe (1988) in mathematics and van Reeuwijk (1995) even in the more abstract field of algebra. The work of van Reeuwijk and his colleagues at the prestigious Freudenthal Institute provides a wealth of other material in this area, including their curriculum package "Mathematics in Context."

In all units, students are expected to demonstrate ICT competency, as well as recognising the inherent benefits and dangers of a reliance on technology in teaching and learning (Schultze, 2002; Wells, 1994, Woolsey, 1996). As with all National Institute perspectives, these insights are of value for all educational communities, whatever their philosophical or worldview foundations.

### **Curriculum Evaluation and Construction**

In order to ensure coherence in the body of knowledge, the studies in this track see curriculum as the structuring of learning programs that facilitate learning in contexts that recognise the diverse ways in which students learn and make room for different styles of learning.

Again, the studies draw on a wide range of sources for insights that are given coherence by the worldview foundations developed by students around the core of their religious convictions. Key sources in this area include Brady & Kennedy (1999); Kemmis & McTaggart (1997); van Brummelen (2002); Worthen, Sanders & Fitzgerald (1997). Students are also expected to do their own literature search to locate additional materials other than set readings, and the National Institute Resource Centres provide special services to facilitate this. For this purpose, the National Institute provides students with electronic access to full-text journal databases such as ProQuest.

## **Leadership**

This track traces the philosophical presuppositions that have affected school leadership and administration over time and critiques the positivistic scientism and pragmatism particularly inherent in these presuppositions (Maxcy, 2001). It affirms the need for coherence of value and practice (Bottery, 1990; Lakomski, 1985; West, 1993; Postman, 1996).

The track asserts that coherence is achieved in a biblical worldview but students are encouraged to critique this assertion along with the inconsistencies that are observed in the application of this worldview to educational leadership (Stronks & Blomberg, 1993; Ormell, 1980).

Implicit with the discussion of values and practice is the notion of vision. This calls for a recognition of the communal ownership of vision that is consistent with the beliefs to which the community is committed (Sergiovanni, 2000; Lambert, 2004). At the same time, it encourages discernment of the dangers of an artificially imposed vision upon a community (Barnett, McCormick & Conners, 2001; Fullan, 1992).

The leader of a Christian school is located within the broader context of the educational landscape that is marked by notions of standards, efficiency and accountability and the sometimes conflicting calls for cultural leadership, value commitment and care (Sergiovanni, 2000; Noddings, 2005; Grace, 1993; Holmes & Wynne, 1989).

In the light of these demands the students are encouraged to consider the distinctives of biblical leadership with application to the context of schools. Themes include: servant leadership; accountability; nurture, supervision, example and vision-setting.

Along with educational commentators of various persuasions, the unit sounds a warning (from its biblical worldview perspective) against the prevailing trends of pragmatism, eclecticism and economic rationalism and calls for leadership that does more than maintaining what schools do but leadership that inspires what they ought to do, consistent with a coherent vision of and for life.

## **Research**

Students are required to engage in small research tasks throughout the National Institute programs. Most commonly, they are action research projects that involve systematic investigation into the effectiveness of their own teaching practice. In addition to drawing on the Deakin action research model, students are encouraged to explore wider views of action research such as those presented by McNiff and Whitehead (2002).

For those who exhibit the inclination and aptitude for more intensive professional research, two research tracks, involving a minor and major research project, are offered. For this, students are expected to become familiar with a broad range of research approaches and strategies, both qualitative and quantitative and to show the ability to determine the strategy best suited to specific problems (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Gorard, 2001; Ezzy, 2001).

## **Ensuring the Coherence of Learning**

We regard it as important that graduates from our courses have a coherent understanding of what they have learned that demonstrates a coherent body of knowledge. For this reason the National Institute has included as a required final subject in the BEd and MEd program, a unique summative integration component, with two options. In the best traditions of Donald Schon's reflective practitioner model (Kelleher, 2002;

Schon, 1987), these concluding units provide the opportunity for students to reflect upon the comprehensive growth and development that has occurred during their entire study program, demonstrating at the end of the course that what has been learned has been integrated into a coherent understanding of effective educational practice. As an innovative, longitudinal component of the entire course, this additional piece of coursework reflects the National Institute's concern to equip teachers with the evaluative tools that enable them to confront change and the deprofessionalisation of teaching (Caine & Caine, 1997; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999) by becoming collegial shapers of their educational contexts rather than "be victimized by the relentless intrusion of external change forces" (Fullan, 2001, p. 123).

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