

St Leo's College

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[This is an edited version of the paper given by Fr Head, as the full text was not available.]

The University of Queensland only began in 1909. While four residential Colleges were founded in the next few years, it was not until 1914 that discussions began about the establishment of a residential for young Catholic men attending the University. The instigator of these discussions was Br McGee of Nudgee College who was concerned to have a place where his former students could pursue their university studies in a Catholic environment. A beginning was finally possible when Archbishop Dunne who died in January 1917 left two properties on Wickham Terrace for this purpose. Fortunately, his successor, Archbishop James Duhig, was also keen on setting up a Catholic University College. Although both houses were in poor condition, renovations began on one of them and the first eleven students moved in at the same time. A diocesan priest, Fr Michael McKenna, was appointed Rector and a Council was established in order to have the College affiliated with the University. St Leo's was formally opened and blessed by Archbishop Kelly of

Sydney on 30 September 1917. An adjacent house was purchased to provide for future expansion.

Michael McKenna proved to be an excellent Rector. He was followed in the next few years by several other diocesan priests, each of whom worked hard to increase student numbers and to wrestle with College finances. Mention should be made particularly of Dr John English (Rector 1926-35) who encouraged intellectual debate and made the college an integral part of University life. The early rectors were talented diocesan priests who usually had other responsibilities in the Archdiocese, and this determined the amount of time and effort they were able to give to college administration and pastoral care of the students. A Vice-Rector position was established in 1922 and this alleviated some of the problems.

Several of the early St Leo's graduates became leading professional men in Brisbane and beyond, and were very proud of their association with the College. The Depression saw a drop in the overall number of University students and also in the numbers at St Leo's. Archbishop Duhig was inclined to sell the College buildings, but some of the Old Leonians offered to run and finance the College and they traded it out of difficulty.

Duhig then decided to invite the Vincentian fathers to take over the management of St Leo's and the first Vincentian Rector, Fr Eugene Hogan, arrived in 1936. He was replaced the following year by Fr Patrick Meenagh (1937-46). He had to contend with problems caused by WWII. Low student numbers and financial difficulties plagued both Fr Meenagh CM and his successor, Fr Gerald Power

CM (1947-53), and it seems that the buildings and facilities were in a bad state during the 1940s and 50s.

The Vincentians terminated their association with the College at the end of 1953, and were replaced by the Jesuits. The first Jesuit Rector, Very Rev Thomas Johnston SJ (1954-66) was an authoritarian figure who brooked no student nonsense. He ran a 'dry' establishment and did his best to improve the academic record of the College.

The move to St Lucia had been long anticipated, but did not become a reality until 1961 when 72 students took up residence in the new buildings for the start of the academic year. Financial constraints meant that initial building plans were severely curtailed, but thanks to the generosity of federal and state governments, the Catholic people of Queensland, and cost saving by subsequent Rectors, new buildings and wings and other amenities were added gradually.

The Jesuits were responsible for the management of the College for 47 years, until the departure of the last Jesuit Rector, Fr Bill Uren SJ, in September 2000. Layman John Long was appointed as Rector in 2001 and remained till 2003 when the Christian Brother Vince Skelly took over the position for a period of ten years. The current Rector is layman Stephen Foley.

This paper also dealt with some of the other issues the various Rectors and the Council faced over the years, e.g. how to manage alcohol on the premises, how to work constructively with young men, many still in their teens, in the face of changing social mores and community

expectations, what is the primary role of a residential college – should it be a student boarding house or somewhere where young Catholic men can be given assistance to grow into maturity both spiritually and academically. The management of a residential college is a difficult job - for the younger students, the Rector and his assistants are virtually *in loco parentis*, and for older students it is a delicate balancing act between maintaining college standards and allowing the freedoms which young men consider their right. It calls for a mix of discipline and tolerance moderated by the application of commonsense. The different Rectors and their assistants dealt with these issues in different ways, and relationships between the students and management waxed and waned accordingly. In recent years, the issue of a co-ed college has been canvassed, but St Leo's remains a single sex establishment while having good relationships and some shared services with its neighboring college for women – Duchesne.

Today, the Bishops of Queensland are the Trustees of St Leo's, with a governance board of lay people whose principal tasks are to maintain the Catholic identity of the College, to plan for the future, and to support the work of the college administration.