

Oasis One Year On

Geoff Boyce, Oasis Coordinating Chaplain, April 8, 2014

Oasis is a welcoming and enabling community, open to all, contributing to personal and communal spiritual enrichment while promoting mutual respect and appreciative understanding of diverse religious paths and cultural traditions.

April effectively marks **the first year of Oasis**, as embedded in the University, with the appointment of the Oasis Administrative Officer, Lisa Chandler in April 2013. This report celebrates the achievements of Oasis over that 12 months and points to directions for continued innovation.

My primary concern has been to structure Oasis for sustainability, as an agent for **wellbeing** across the university, with **hospitality** as its primary *modus operandus*.

Adopting wellbeing as the focus for Oasis provides a proactive context for fostering positive relationships among religions on campus and allows Oasis to negotiate the secular context of the university. However it also provides grounds for Oasis to contribute positively, in a complementary way, in keeping with the Strategic Plan of the University, in support of the various agencies embedded in the institution.

Over this first year I have focused on creating an infrastructure to ensure Flinders continues to be a leader in negotiating religious, cultural and spiritual dimensions in a secular context, while continuing to be an inclusive provider of pastoral care, and an initiator of opportunities for appreciative inter-cultural and inter-religious engagement among students.

Oasis draws on the expertise it has developed to provide innovative leadership externally, contributing to ongoing global discussions in its domain.

Achievements over the last twelve months

1. Re-orientation

- establishing **reporting and consulting expectations** with Andrew Wood and the DVC(A)
- developing **in-house protocols** with the Oasis Administrative Officer
- holding an ***Oasis Celebration Dinner*** to launch and promote Oasis and its function

2. Envisioning

- developing an **Oasis vision statement** with consensus among Oasis users
- conducting a ***Working Dinner*** as a means of creating a diverse **advisory body** comprising Oasis team members, university staff and religious representatives, generating ideas for the development of Oasis

3. Re-structuring

- restructuring the core group of Oasis stakeholders **from Flinder Multifaith Chaplaincy to an inclusive Oasis Team.**
(Religious communities are still encouraged to appoint chaplains, who are expected to become members of the Oasis Team, alongside other volunteers, typically retired staff, local community contacts or students, all committed to the Oasis vision and values.)
- linking with **Volunteering Australia (SA,NT)** to provide a framework for volunteers contributing as the Oasis Team.
- **maintaining** the ethos of Oasis, its flexible service delivery and its weekly team-building/networking lunch meeting
- developing a **theoretical framework** for offering informal support to students consistent with universal values among religions
- employing an **Oasis Professional Skills Development Mentor** to offer professional skills development to the Oasis Team in support of the theoretical framework
- initiating a monthly **Oasis News**, circulated by email to a broad and ever-growing data base
- holding an **Oasis Celebration Dinner** toward the end of 2013
- nominating four **Oasis Ambassadors**, recent graduates who commit to upholding the Oasis vision in their ongoing professional life.

4. Networking

- During 2013, I travelled to Europe and
 - ❖ spent a week embedded with **MoTiv**, who contract with **Delft Technical University** to provide student leadership training and coaching, other innovative activities such as cross-cultural interpretation and accompaniment of groups of postgraduate students visiting other countries, university-wide theme discussion evenings, and film projects in support of staff-student understanding and professional motivation.
 - ❖ continued discussion with the Director of chaplaincy services, **Lutheran Church of Finland**, about adaption to religious pluralism, translation of my book 'An Improbable Feast' into Finnish, and contribution to their chaplaincy resources.
 - ❖ presented a workshop at the **Conference of European University Chaplains**, Uppsala, Sweden
 - ❖ was Keynote speaker at **Sheffield College**, UK, at a day conference of chaplains and religious representatives, discussing my book 'An Improbable Feast'.
- In early 2014, I undertook a consultancy with the Uniting Church in Victoria-Tasmania concerning university chaplaincy.
- Oasis hosts the monthly **Service Providers Forum** under the auspices of Health Counseling and Disability Services and networks with most of its members, particularly the International Student Services Unit, Health, Counseling and Disability Services and FUSA.

- I also network regularly with the Executive Director of the **SA Council of Churches**, the Executive Officer of **Chaplaincy Services SA** and chaplains at **Adelaide University and UniSA** as well as **mentors** who are part of the Oasis advisory body.

Oasis Usage

Students

Each week, on average,

- 105 students access Oasis daily, many of them international students
- 3 different student groups use Oasis between 9 and 5 each week day and 2 groups between 5 and 9 (out-of-hours) each weekday
- Oasis is used twice on a Saturday and once on a Sunday by various student groups
- The average size of groups on weekends is 30.

Others

The International Student Services Unit and the Service Providers Forum also regularly use Oasis. From time to time Oasis provides a venue for related organizations, such as Spiritual Care Australia, to connect with Oasis.

Looking to the Next Year

I expect that the second year will focus on consolidating these achievements and developing the two main themes within our vision statement: *well being* and *appreciative interfaith-intercultural understanding*.

1. Wellbeing

During January and February I met separately with the Chancellor and various Deans. These discussions affirmed the decision to place wellbeing at the heart of the Oasis enterprise and suggested that Oasis may play a role connecting localized initiatives in support of student wellbeing across the university and, in its role as host, support synergies that may arise from these connections.

Oasis supports the principles outlined by *Adelaide Thinker in Residence 2012-2013, Professor Martin Seligman*, in *Building the State of Wellbeing – a strategy for South Australia*. These principles constitute a theoretical framework for the role of Oasis in promoting wellbeing across the university.

Wellbeing Initiatives

In hospitality to Aboriginal people, Oasis is providing a venue for workshops and training events conducted by the **Australian Institute for Loss and Grief**, reaching out to Aboriginal people in the southern area.

In collaboration with the **School of Social Work**, two Masters students are on placement in Oasis, undertaking surveys into the **wellbeing of international students**, particularly with respect of the University's recently established **Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy**.

2. Interfaith-intercultural

In its approach to the interfaith-intercultural aspects of Oasis, Oasis is adopting an ***Appreciative Enquiry*** method, pioneered for business management by David Cooperrider. This method supports, and is in keeping with, principles of hospitality, universal values among religions, and the Positive Psychology of Seligman.

Interfaith-intercultural Initiatives

Oasis has initiated discussions with the Chairman of the **SA Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs Commission** to explore how a **forum for religious leaders** in South Australia might be established, and the ***Multifaith Association of SA*** be repositioned to provide better support for minority religious communities and stronger interfaith relations among religious communities in SA.

Oasis is sponsoring a visit by Dave Andrews and Nora Amath in June to facilitate **dialogues between Muslim and Christian communities** in Adelaide and a forum at **Woodville High School**. Dave and Nora will also provide a focus for an ***Oasis Celebration Dinner***.

A series of four ***Interfaith Conversations*** is being offered to students in March and April.

A series of six weekly conversations about a ***Christian Theology of Religions*** is being offered to the university and the public in June and July.

Following the refurbishment of the Muslim Prayer Rooms in Oasis, Oasis has been consulting with **Buildings and Property** about the provision of appropriate religious facilities in the **Tonsley Development**.

Recent Developments

The ***Motiv team from Delft***, who will be accompanying TUD students in China in late June, are visiting Flinders in early July. We are hoping they will conduct one of their legendary evenings with Engineering students, also making connections with Engineering Australia. This would showcase a new model of student engagement that links student societies with academic staff and professional associations.

At a recent meeting of Oasis stakeholders with Carolyn Davidson, Director, Strategic Project Delivery, concerning the proposed new **Student Hub**, Oasis was affirmed as both a place of **student support and empowerment** and a **centre of informal learning**, complementing the formal learning of the classroom and the Web.

The significance of creating space for the mind to make learning connections away from sources of formal learning is being recognized by educators and neuroscientists. This insight might be considered in strategizing an important function of the proposed new student Hub, one in which Oasis may contribute.

But also at the meeting, the **fluidity** of Oasis was recognized – as an agency connecting between, supporting across, flowing within, and empowering service centres and schools across the university by enacting its principles of hospitality in support of well being.