

A Critical Look at Tertiary Chaplaincy: Reassessing its Purpose for the 21st Century in the Australian Context

Joanna Thyer
Tertiary Campus Ministry Association
University of Technology Sydney

Abstract

The increasingly pluralistic nature of university campuses in Australia has meant that traditional Christian approaches to chaplaincy are no longer adequate. Recent societal changes, such as the campaign to recognise the Indigenous voice, rising political and religious polarisation, global conflicts, climate change, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, have reshaped the landscape in which universities operate. Within this environment, questions of identity, belonging, and meaning are more significant than ever. Chaplaincy services, with their focus on spiritual and existential questions, are uniquely positioned to contribute to student wellbeing and to the wider university community. Yet, important questions remain: What should the role of chaplaincy be in this context? How can these services best foster inclusion and support wellbeing? What policy frameworks and standards of professionalism are needed to ensure chaplaincy meets the needs of all students and staff? Despite growing recognition of spirituality as an essential dimension of wellbeing, little research exists on the current state and impact of university chaplaincy in Australia. This paper aims to address that gap by critically examining the changing context, challenges, and potential of tertiary chaplaincy. Through an exploration of its historical foundations, evolving models, and current practice, this paper asks: Are university chaplaincy services equipped to meet the needs of an increasingly complex, diverse, and fast-changing world?

Keywords

Wellbeing; Chaplaincy; Pastoral care; Spiritual wellbeing; Spirituality.

Introduction

The purpose of this professional paper is to provide a critical reflection on the changing nature, challenges, and future of tertiary chaplaincy in Australia. Grounded in more than three decades of professional experience across tertiary, healthcare, and community chaplaincy, as well as sustained engagement with colleagues, policy documents, and the scholarly literature, this paper offers a critical reassessment of the purpose, value, and practice of chaplaincy within Australian higher education.

In recent years, the landscape of Australian universities has shifted. The traditional Christian models of chaplaincy no longer suffice for campuses now marked by religious diversity, cultural complexity, and rapid social change. Issues such as the campaign to recognise the Indigenous voice, rising political and religious polarisation, global conflicts, climate change, and the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have all shaped the world in which university chaplaincy now operates. Compounding this is the increasingly corporate nature of universities operating in a brand focused world. In this environment, questions of identity, belonging, and meaning are more significant than ever before.

This paper draws extensively on lived professional experience, sectoral observation, and policy analysis to examine whether chaplaincy services are equipped to meet the needs of students and staff in this complex context. It is structured around several key themes that define the work of chaplaincy. These include the shifting landscape of Australian universities, the redefinition of spirituality, the complex relationship between chaplaincy and student wellbeing, the persistent challenges of funding and policy, the movement toward greater professionalism, and the ongoing

need for reflective, inclusive practice. Throughout, I draw on my own observations and on the growing body of literature addressing these challenges from both Australian and international perspectives.

My intention is to provide a critical reassessment of chaplaincy's role and to offer insights and recommendations for the sector as it confronts an uncertain future.

Background: The changing context and history of tertiary chaplaincy

Historically, chaplaincy's original "royal" association comes from the French term "Capellanus", meaning "guardian of the cloak", a reference to St Martin of Tours in the fourth century who was moved by compassion to share his cloak with a beggar. The term "Capellanus" eventually evolved into the English word "chaplain" (Boyce, 2005). In a similar way, the concept of pastoral care stems from Christian traditions of "looking after the sheep" and the biblical image of "walking along the road with someone". Together, these evoke the metaphorical act of "wrapping one's cloak" around another as a gesture of emotional and spiritual support ("Pastoral Care," 2022).

Although tertiary chaplaincy has evolved considerably in recent decades, its central mission of providing pastoral "wrap-around" care for staff and students remains (Shean, 2020). Yet, the traditional practices and models of university chaplaincy require reassessment in light of contemporary realities. To make sense of the current function and challenges facing chaplaincy services, it is necessary to situate them within a wider historical and social context. In medieval Europe, universities were closely aligned with religious institutions both intellectually and spiritually (Karlsohn, 2017). Today, however, most universities are secular and have moved away from those religious affiliations.

Traditionally, chaplains were associated with specific religions and were often ordained clergy whose university work was an extension of their ministry in local parishes. From the nineteenth century onward and especially after the 1950s, Australian universities, unless directly affiliated with major churches, became markedly more secular and governance shifted away from religious authorities to secular ones (Hunt, 2013). In the current era, chaplaincy services are usually part of broader university portfolios such as wellbeing, counselling, student services, or inclusivity. This reflects a wider shift towards holistic care and belonging, particularly with the current emphasis on psycho-social wellbeing for students and staff (de Souza & Halahoff, 2018; Rockenbach, 2017). The spiritual and cultural needs of university communities are further shaped by the multicultural makeup and geographic context of each institution.

It is also important to distinguish between chaplaincy and other wellbeing professions. For example, psychologists typically hold advanced clinical qualifications, while chaplains and pastoral care workers may come from diverse educational backgrounds in theology, pastoral care, or related fields. Pastoral encounters in chaplaincy are often marked by more fluid boundaries than those in clinical counselling, which can allow for closer, more ongoing professional relationships between chaplains and students (Aune et al., 2023; National School Chaplaincy Association, 2022). Such relationships are significant in fostering community and supporting students' academic and personal development (Schmalzbauer, 2021).

Given these changes in campus demographics, the growing importance of professional standards, and the increasing diversity of cultural and faith backgrounds, the question emerges as to how well tertiary chaplaincy is meeting the psycho-social and spiritual needs of today's university communities. Identifying and supporting what works best in chaplaincy practice is essential in this context.

Chaplaincy in education today

Today, universities are fundamentally spaces of engagement where students are encouraged to connect, learn, and thrive in a safe and inclusive environment. Chaplaincy services play an important role in this mission. Increasingly, universities appoint ecumenical or multi-faith chaplaincy coordinators (Boyce, 2005), while faith-based chaplains often serve on a voluntary basis, supported by their own communities. As a result, chaplaincy departments have become highly pluralistic, with Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Indigenous Elders, lay ministers, pastoral carers, and representatives of Christian denominations all serving the campus community. The presence of large numbers of international students has made a multi-faith approach to chaplaincy not only desirable but essential (Blundell, 1999).

The effectiveness of chaplaincy is shaped by the many ways that secular, cultural, and religious perspectives influence understandings of spirituality and faith. This complexity is heightened by shifting personal and cultural identities; the impact of global events such as the Middle East conflict; a growing emphasis on inclusivity and belonging, both on campus and online; and continuing debates about freedom of speech and campus safety. At times, differences or tensions within and between religious groups, and among chaplains, students, and staff, may also influence the operation of chaplaincy (Barton et al., 2020). Holistic perspectives on spirituality, including Indigenous spirituality, have become increasingly prominent, and this reflects broader social conversations about belonging and national movements to recognise Indigenous voices. As universities place greater emphasis on equity, wellbeing, and inclusion, and as chaplaincy services are more often located within student services portfolios, it becomes increasingly important to develop chaplaincy models that are both genuinely inclusive and culturally responsive (Briese, 2016; Perfect, 2021).

Consequently, the landscape of tertiary chaplaincy in Australia is complex and at times inconsistent. In church-funded universities, holistic pastoral care is often highly valued and well resourced. In contrast, chaplaincy in more secular institutions may be more peripheral or only loosely integrated into broader university life. The increasing secularism of Australian society has contributed to this variability and made the purpose and value of chaplaincy a subject of ongoing negotiation.

Secular universities, in particular, have sometimes approached religious and spiritual matters with caution and this has led to mixed experiences of chaplaincy. Public debates and negative publicity surrounding school chaplaincy programs (Shean, 2020) have also shaped perceptions, particularly in secular environments. The definition of good chaplaincy practice remains under-researched and this has underscored the need for greater understanding and recognition of chaplaincy's contributions within the broader context of student services.

In recent years, concerns about mental health and rising rates of anxiety and isolation among both students and staff have become increasingly prominent. Chaplains have often responded with timely and effective pastoral support (Perfect, 2021), but there are still instances in which certain religious groups remain siloed, limiting engagement with the wider university community. Such patterns can present significant challenges for both chaplains and students, especially at a time when universities and the broader society are navigating heightened social and cultural polarisation.

Literature overview

Spirituality, wellbeing, and the unique contribution of chaplaincy

Over the past two decades, the literature on spirituality, wellbeing, and chaplaincy in higher education has changed considerably. Earlier scholarship often focused on chaplaincy as a religious

or liturgical service, but current research and university policy now increasingly recognise spirituality as a broad, evolving phenomenon that touches on wellbeing, identity, meaning-making, and resilience (Estanek, 2006; Kourie, 2009; Love & Talbot, 1999).

Whilst most religions have spirituality at their core, in our post-modern world, we are redefining spirituality in the wake of understanding that it is not necessarily connected to religion (Kourie, 2009). The diverse definitions of spirituality, influenced by cultural, historical, sociological, philosophical, theological, and anthropological notions which embrace concepts like self-transcendence and meaning, are part of bigger questions that are absorbed into the diverse existential lives of those in higher education.

For many students, spirituality is not limited to formal religious belief or ritual. It is experienced as an ongoing search for personal authenticity, deeper connections with self and others, meaning and purpose, and a sense of belonging within a wider community. The World Health Organization acknowledges spiritual wellbeing as an essential part of overall health, alongside the physical, emotional, and mental dimensions (Carey & Gleeson, 2017; Dhar et al., 2013). The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* likewise affirms the fundamental importance of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (United Nations, 1948, Art. 18).

Recent national research further illustrates these trends. The Spiritual Health Association's national report reveals that a significant proportion of Australians now describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious" or "non-religious" (2021, p. 6–7). Nevertheless, many still identify meaning, connection, and hope as core to their wellbeing (Spiritual Health Association, 2021). Such findings highlight the reality that the need for spiritual care on campus extends well beyond those who identify with a particular faith tradition.

International research also highlights the positive contribution of chaplaincy to university life. Chaplaincy is linked to enhanced student wellbeing, belonging, and resilience, as well as increased satisfaction and a sense of community (Nielsen & Small, 2019; Rockenbach, 2017). Much of this value stems from the unique role chaplains play as relational listeners, able to support, offer deep listening, and engage across a spectrum of worldviews with respect (Aune et al., 2023; Briese, 2016).

Evidence from the healthcare sector also strengthens the argument for chaplaincy. Research demonstrates that spiritual support contributes to reduced burnout, increased resilience, and better coping in times of crisis (Tunks Leach et al., 2023). Although universities are different from hospitals and emergency services, the values of non-judgemental presence, compassion, and existential support are transferable and remain vital.

Inclusion emerges as another key theme in the literature. Today's universities are expected to provide services that are culturally safe, trauma-informed, and inclusive, especially for Indigenous students, international students, and others from equity backgrounds (Briese, 2016; de Souza & Halahoff, 2018). Chaplaincy, with its traditions of being welcoming and hospitable, is uniquely placed to contribute to these aspirations.

Finally, there is widespread agreement in the literature about the need for ongoing research, evaluation, and innovation within chaplaincy. As the demographic and institutional contexts continue to shift, chaplains need to remain reflective, adaptable, and committed to evidence-based practice.

Funding and policy

One of the most significant and persistent challenges for university chaplaincy in Australia is the inconsistent nature of its funding and policy frameworks. Unlike other professions within student

services, the level and type of funding for chaplaincy can vary, not only between different universities but sometimes even across campuses within the same institution (Aune et al., 2019; van Stee et al., 2021).

This variability creates a patchwork of approaches that has important implications for the sustainability, reach, and equity of chaplaincy services. In some settings, chaplains are employed as full-time, salaried university staff and are integrated into broader wellbeing, equity, or student services teams. In other institutions, chaplains may be funded by religious bodies, serve on part-time contracts, or volunteer their services, often with limited access to training, supervision, or professional development (Aune et al., 2019; Spiritual Health Association, 2021).

The way chaplaincy is funded and structured shapes both its perceived legitimacy and accessibility. Research consistently shows that chaplaincy is most effective and widely accessed when it is recognised as a university-wide service that is open to all students and staff (van Stee et al., 2021). When chaplaincy is institutionally supported, neutral, and inclusive, students and staff are more likely to engage with its services.

Policy frameworks are equally important for defining the role and standards of chaplaincy. Clear, well-communicated policies help establish the remit and professional expectations of chaplains; clarify the non-proselytising ethos; and reinforce the principles of inclusion, safeguarding, and respect (Holmes, 2021). Where chaplaincy is integrated into the university's structure and strategic priorities, particularly around wellbeing, equity, and diversity, chaplains are better positioned to contribute meaningfully to university life.

Recent years have seen some promising developments in the sector. For example, the Queensland University of Technology *Spiritual Support and Inclusion Action Plan 2023–2025* embeds chaplaincy within the university's broader diversity and inclusion strategy, with commitments to spiritual wellbeing, dedicated spaces, staff training, and ongoing program review (Queensland University of Technology [QUT], 2023). Similarly, the Inclusive Communities model at Western Sydney University places chaplains within the Student Community team. At Western Sydney University, chaplaincy works closely with student leaders and clubs to promote belonging, address isolation, and support resilience across the university community (Western Sydney University, 2024).

International research highlights the benefits of institutional rather than denominational funding and governance for chaplaincy. Studies from the United Kingdom and United States indicate the advantages of university-employed chaplains with involvement in institutional decision-making and access to professional development as well as wide, accessible, and varied multi-faith spaces catering for a variety of faith and spiritual needs (Aune et al., 2019; Cadge & Skaggs, 2018). Aune et al. (2019) and Cadge and Skaggs (2018) observe that such chaplains are able to have a broader and more positive impact on student wellbeing and campus culture.

Despite these advances, many chaplains in Australia still work in inconsistent environments, sometimes without stable contracts, sufficient professional supervision, or clear institutional mandates. This lack of stability leaves chaplaincy services vulnerable to budget cuts, policy changes, and shifts in university leadership. These challenges can undermine chaplains' capacity to deliver sustained, high-quality care and support for diverse university communities.

Strengthening funding and policy frameworks for tertiary chaplaincy is therefore essential to ensuring equitable, inclusive, and effective spiritual care within Australian higher education. As the sector continues to evolve, sharing and adopting models of best practice, along with securing both institutional and sector-wide support, will be critical for the ongoing sustainability and impact of chaplaincy.

Professionalism and qualifications

As chaplaincy has evolved, so too have expectations regarding qualifications, training, and professionalism. In the past, chaplains were often selected solely on the basis of ordination or denominational endorsement, with little attention paid to broader competencies. Today, however, chaplains are expected to be skilled in theology, pastoral care, counselling, cultural competence, ethical decision-making, and trauma-informed practice (Aune et al., 2023; Holmes, 2021).

Professionalism also demands ongoing supervision, reflective practice, and participation in professional networks. Many chaplains undertake additional training in mental health, suicide prevention, LGBTQI inclusion, and cultural safety. Professional chaplaincy bodies and university guidelines increasingly require adherence to codes of conduct, regular supervision, and continuous professional development (Cadge & Skaggs, 2018).

My own experience highlights the importance of these standards. The diversity of students and staff, the complexity of university life, and the sensitive nature of spiritual and existential care mean that chaplains must be equipped to respond ethically, effectively, and inclusively. Regular supervision, peer support, and professional development have been essential in my own practice, not just for skill development but for personal resilience and reflective capacity.

There remains considerable variation across the sector in terms of qualifications, role definitions, and access to professional supervision for chaplains. While some universities have established clear position descriptions and structured professional pathways, others continue to rely on voluntary or denominationally appointed chaplains who may have limited access to training or formal support. This inconsistency can undermine both the effectiveness and perceived legitimacy of chaplaincy within the university community.

International models provide valuable direction for the future. The Chaplaincy Innovation Lab at Brandeis University, for example, has articulated a clear vision for chaplaincy as a professional field, with defined standards, transparent recruitment, and strong networks for supervision and training (Cadge & Skaggs, 2018).

Practice reflections

From my perspective, the heart of chaplaincy remains presence. It is the commitment to show up, listen, and offer care without agenda or precondition. The value of simply being there cannot be underestimated, especially in an age marked by anxiety, disconnection, and institutional pressure. Many of the most meaningful encounters in my own experience have happened not during planned events but through informal conversations, spontaneous gatherings, or shared moments of crisis. Chaplains are uniquely positioned to hold space for ambiguity, doubt, vulnerability, and transformation. They are often the only professionals on campus whose primary role is not to assess, diagnose, or solve problems but to accompany and support. This approach is highly valued by students and staff, regardless of their religious or spiritual background.

Inclusion is a defining theme of contemporary chaplaincy practice. To be effective, chaplains must move beyond the boundaries of their own tradition and engage with communities that are multicultural, multi-faith, and increasingly non-religious. In practice, this means participating in interfaith dialogue, supporting cultural and social justice initiatives, and collaborating with student clubs, equity offices, and Indigenous support teams. It also requires ongoing self-reflection about privilege, bias, and the complex history of faith institutions in Australia. Chaplains are called to act as advocates as well as companions, supporting students who are marginalised, isolated, or facing systemic barriers. This work is not always comfortable or easy, but it is essential if chaplaincy is to be genuinely inclusive and transformative.

At the same time, the risk of siloed or insular practice remains a concern. When chaplains lack institutional support or recognition, there can be a temptation to retreat into serving only those with similar beliefs or to focus more on ceremonial rather than relational aspects of the role. Ongoing reflection, supervision, and collaboration are critical for avoiding such pitfalls and for maintaining the integrity and impact of chaplaincy work.

Visibility and communication are also vital. Chaplaincy is sometimes invisible to those who need it most or misunderstood by university leadership. Advocacy, ongoing evaluation, and the sharing of stories about chaplaincy's impact are essential for securing funding, integration, and recognition within the broader university context.

Institutional examples from within Australia and internationally offer insights into effective practice. The Inclusive Communities model at Western Sydney University demonstrates a strong commitment to chaplaincy as a component of student wellbeing and inclusion. Chaplains are embedded within student community teams, work closely with student clubs and collectives, and act as visible advocates for belonging and inclusion. Their work is supported by clear policy, stable funding, and dedicated spaces for spiritual practice, reflection, and community events, enabling chaplains to respond quickly to crises and collaborate effectively with other professionals (Western Sydney University, 2024). Similarly, Queensland University of Technology's *Spiritual Support and Inclusion Action Plan 2023–2025* aligns chaplaincy work with broader university strategies for equity and inclusion, recognises spirituality as a key dimension of wellbeing, and provides for regular review and evaluation (QUT, 2023). International examples, such as New York University's multifaith chaplaincy, highlight the value of large, diverse chaplaincy teams; visible leadership; and a commitment to interfaith dialogue and research (New York University, n.d.). The literature from the United Kingdom and the United States further supports the benefits of stable funding, integration with student services, and explicit recognition of chaplaincy's contribution to student wellbeing and campus culture (Aune et al., 2019; Cadge & Skaggs, 2018).

Despite these advances, the future of tertiary chaplaincy in Australia remains uncertain. The sector continues to face multiple pressures, including increasing complexity and demand from students, budget constraints, ongoing debates about the role of religion and secularism, and questions regarding the relevance and value of chaplaincy. There is a real risk that chaplaincy could become marginalised or reduced to a purely ceremonial function, particularly in times of financial austerity. Equally, there is a danger that chaplaincy might serve only a narrow segment of the campus population, rather than being seen as a core contributor to university wellbeing, equity, and inclusion.

To address these challenges, chaplaincy must continue to innovate, advocate, and clearly demonstrate its impact. This includes developing more robust research and evaluation, sharing best practices, raising professional standards, and supporting ongoing professional development. Chaplains must also seek new ways to communicate the value of their work to students, staff, university leaders, and the wider community through storytelling, advocacy, collaboration, and a readiness to adapt to emerging needs.

Above all, chaplaincy must remain grounded in its core values of presence, inclusion, compassion, and a steadfast commitment to supporting the flourishing of individuals and communities across the diverse landscape of Australian higher education.

Recommendations

Building on the reflections and case examples explored in this paper, this section sets out practical recommendations for advancing chaplaincy practice in Australian higher education. The goal is to translate the insights gained from both lived experience and research into clear, actionable strategies

that address the evolving challenges and opportunities facing the sector. By focusing on the themes of presence, inclusion, funding, policy, and professional standards, these recommendations aim to strengthen chaplaincy's contribution to student and staff wellbeing, belonging, and holistic development.

A key priority is to ensure that chaplaincy teams reflect the full diversity of the university community. This means recruiting and supporting chaplains from a wide range of spiritual, religious, and cultural backgrounds, as well as those skilled in working with students and staff who do not identify with any tradition. Professional development in areas such as cultural competence, trauma-informed care, and inclusive practice will help ensure chaplaincy is equipped to meet the complex needs of today's student body.

Integration with other student support services is also essential. When chaplaincy is embedded within portfolios such as wellbeing, counselling, and equity, chaplains are better able to collaborate across disciplines, participate in holistic case management, and provide timely, accessible support to students and staff.

Stable and transparent funding remains a key priority for effective chaplaincy. Universities are encouraged to prioritise core institutional funding for chaplaincy positions and activities, and to provide ongoing access to supervision and professional learning. Reliable funding signals the value placed on chaplaincy and enables long-term planning, consistency, and responsiveness.

The provision of accessible and welcoming spaces for spiritual practice and reflection should also be a priority. These spaces should accommodate the needs of faith-based, interfaith, and secular communities, and serve as visible symbols of the university's commitment to inclusion and holistic wellbeing.

Comprehensive policy frameworks are necessary to clarify chaplaincy's scope, responsibilities, and professional standards. Clear guidelines can help ensure chaplaincy services are non-coercive, ethically sound, and aligned with broader university goals. Regular review and stakeholder consultation will help keep policies current and relevant.

Finally, the sector would benefit from continued research, evaluation, and knowledge sharing. Universities should support chaplains in engaging in reflective practice, participating in professional networks, and sharing outcomes. Ongoing collaboration across institutions will help build a strong evidence base for chaplaincy's impact and inform best practice for the future.

Together, these recommendations offer a practical way forward for universities seeking to strengthen the contribution of chaplaincy to campus life. By embedding these strategies within institutional structures and culture, universities can ensure that chaplaincy remains a vital, responsive, and inclusive resource for all members of the university community.

Conclusions

Tertiary chaplaincy in Australia is at a moment of profound transformation and opportunity. The sector faces significant challenges, including secularisation, increasing diversity, institutional change, and resource constraints, but it also possesses a unique capacity to foster meaning, connection, and wellbeing within university life.

As this paper has argued, the future of chaplaincy depends on robust policy, stable funding, clear professional standards, and an ongoing commitment to inclusion, presence, and relational care. Chaplaincy must be both visionary and practical and encourage universities to realise their deeper purposes while also adapting to the complex realities of a rapidly changing, multicultural society.

Above all, chaplaincy should remain committed to creating open and supportive spaces for the spiritual, existential, and relational dimensions of human experience. These dimensions are just as vital on campus as they are in any other context. By fulfilling this role, chaplains support not only students and staff but also the broader mission of the university as a place of learning, transformation, and hope.

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The author may be contacted via:

Joanna Thyer — joanna.thyer@uts.edu.au

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