

# RTC Academic Freedom Policy

Responsible Officer	Academic Dean
Current Contact	jlee@rtc.edu.au
Approved By	The Board
Responsible Body	Reformed Theological College
Approval Date	November 2019
Effective Date	November 2019
Review Date	November 2020
Related Documents	<i>RTC Academic Freedom Policy (2016)</i> <i>RTC Form of Subscription</i> <i>Grievance Resolution Policy</i>

## Interpretation

In this document:

- **“RTC”** or **“The College”** refers to the Reformed Theological College
- **“Academic Staff”** refers to Faculty, Adjunct Faculty, and Guest Lecturers
- **“Community of Learning”** refers to the community of students and lecturers at RTC
- **“Values of the College”** refers to the values included in the *RTC Core Values* document formed in 2016
- **“Confessional Standards”** refers to those standards listed in Articles 2 and 3 of the Reformed Theological College Constitution
- **“College Authorities”** refers to the Board of Directors
- **“The Board”** refers to the Reformed Theological College Board of Directors

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this document is to specify how Academic Freedom is understood and applied in the explicitly Christian and Reformed environment of the College.

Academic Freedom is an essential prerequisite in the pursuit of the College’s goal to equip the next generation of leaders for the advance of the gospel. In the context of the Reformed Theological College this freedom has to be exercised with due recognition of the fact that the College is based on firm confessional commitments.

## 2. Scope of Policy

This policy applies to all Academic Staff of the College noting that its application is broader than just Academic Staff activity within the narrow scope of College activity. It also applies to

the wider context where Academic Staff are seen as representing the College either explicitly or implicitly.

### 3. Basic Principles

**a. Confessional Commitments.** As a Christian institution the College acknowledges that God himself is the source of all knowledge, that his Word is truth and that Christ is Lord over all things. These convictions are reflected in the College's Confessional Standards which are summarised as follows in the RTC Constitution (Articles 2 and 3):

- The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments in their original languages are accepted as the infallible Word of God and are of binding authority
- The Reformed Confessions commonly known as the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession, the Canons of the Synod of Dort and the Westminster Confession of Faith are accepted as setting forth the system of doctrine contained in Holy Scripture.

Academic Staff shall always act and teach in ways that display a loyalty to, and respect for, the Confessional Standards. Faculty and Adjunct Faculty must act and teach in ways consistent with their subscription to the Standards, which means asserting, maintaining and defending the confessional, Reformed system of doctrine. Guest lecturers shall not act or teach contrary to the Confessional Standards.

**b. A Place of Free Enquiry and Learning.** Subscription to the Confessional Standards does not mean that Academic Staff are each required to think in exactly the same way. Academic Staff are still expected to strive towards the highest ideals of Christian liberty and academic freedom and are, therefore encouraged to pursue truth and knowledge in ways that are honest, accurate and open to review and challenge by peers. Thoughtful reflection that is open to consider new ideas and comfortable with differences of opinion provides the ideal environment in which academic discourse can flourish. In such an environment, Academic Staff should be free from unreasonable restraints on what they say, write and publish within the bounds prescribed in 3a above.

**c. Responsible Exercise of Academic Freedom.** Academic freedom is best exercised in the context of a community of learning. The freedom is not an entitlement for members of the Academic Staff to hold or promote any viewpoint they wish. Rather, within the College community of learning, opinions should be freely exchanged and tested against the views of others and, ultimately, the teachings of Scripture. Responsible use of academic freedom also extends to giving due regard for the basic values of the College. Academic Staff should also be very conscious of the fact that any public statement they make will lead to the public's forming particular perceptions about the College.

#### 4. Practical Implications

- a. As teachers in a community of learning, Academic Staff are encouraged to engage freely in curriculum development, teaching, publishing and scholarly interaction (e.g. conference presentations and debates).
- b. Academic Staff are expected to exercise wise professional, spiritual and personal judgement in their teaching and writing, with the expectation of minimal interference from College Authorities as long as the Confessional Standards are upheld. Academic Staff shall be free to do so without fear of harassment, intimidation or unfair treatment by members of the Academic Staff and College Authorities.
- c. In all academic endeavours, Academic Staff shall act in a professional and ethical manner, in accordance with the principles of intellectual rigour, and shall not harass, vilify, intimidate or defame others.
- d. Academic Staff must strive to honour the boundaries provided by the Confessional Standards. Should they come to conclusions that challenge or contradict clearly articulated or commonly accepted positions regarding matters contained in the Confessional Standards, or that are likely to be controversial with the College's supporting churches and/or the wider evangelical Christian community, they will, in the first instance, discuss these conclusions with the Principal and the Faculty before incorporating them into teaching and publishing activities. The Principal shall then determine whether the matter should be referred to the Board.
- e. Academic staff who conclude that they fundamentally disagree with the system of doctrine within the Confessional Standards will make this known to the Principal, who shall then inform the Faculty and refer the matter to the Board.
- f. Academic Staff shall recognise that there can be substantial differences of opinion on certain matters that will still fall within the parameters of Christian and Reformed orthodoxy as defined in the College's Confessional Standards. Where such differences exist among Academic Staff, these shall be dealt with in a spirit of collegiality and dialogue without attempts being made to restrict the freedom of others to hold to differing opinions.
- g. College Authorities will seek to protect Academic Staff from requests to retract or modify their teaching, research or publications simply because those making the request dislike what is being said. Formal complaints against any member of the Academic Staff will only be investigated by the Board where it can be shown that they have violated professional standards or have advocated positions incompatible with the Confessional Standards. Complaints of this nature will have to be substantiated with supporting evidence.
- h. Whenever Academic Staff feel that their academic freedom is being unduly restricted, they are free to pursue a mutually acceptable resolution by following the procedures of the College's *Grievance Resolution Policy*.

i. Academic Staff should not discourage students from freely expressing their views in class or in written material. This should, however, always be done in a spirit of respect for others. It must be understood that such views do not necessarily represent those of the College

j. Student academic progress and assessment of their work will be measured on academic merit and not by the extent to which their opinions conform to the College's Confessional commitments or an academic staff member's personal opinions.

k. Where students who are studying for pastoral ministry consistently express views outside the bounds of the theological belief of the student's supporting church, the Principal will inform the representatives of the supporting churches.

**Next Review Date:** November 2020