The third session of the Taskforce for the revision of the IBMTE Handbook took place on the campus of Avondale College, an area rich with Adventist history. Twenty-five of the 31 regular members of the Taskforce attended this meeting. In addition, one other IBMTE member (not a member of the Taskforce but an invitee) was present and several local persons from Avondale College and the South Pacific Division attended with voice but not vote.

The session opened on Friday, January 8, with worship, welcome, review of the Terms of Reference, and the overall goal “to create a collective and shared conception of and commitment to theological and ministerial education for the Seventh-day Adventist Church.”

The group was briefed on the “Open Forum” held in Atlanta, Georgia, where the professors from Adventist universities had gathered for an annual professional meetings. A more complete report of this meeting can be found on the IBMTE and AAA websites. In brief, there was expressed the desire not to list so many specific characteristics, skills, and outcomes for pastors (in Chapter VIII), but to describe broader categories allowing room for various areas of the world field (and their BMTEs) to add specific items according to their area needs. In addition, it should not be written in order to address problems in one particular area or situation.

The other subject that generated major discussion in Atlanta had to do with the selection of teachers (ch. IV). A major aspect of this discussion had to do with where the judgment for qualification and endorsement should take place. Should it be in a more centralized administrative body (such as IBMTE) or should it be more decentralized (such as the universities) or a middle approach (such as the division BMTEs)? The rationale for it to be done by the university is because it would be done by peers who know individuals better than at a division or GC level. Also, there was a desire for a provision for exceptions to some of the requirements, e.g. requiring pastoral experience for every teacher.

The Taskforce at Avondale picked up the discussion regarding endorsement of teachers. The big issue at Avondale dealt with how the church can and should relate to the school. The requirements for attaining university status in Australia reportedly does not allow any body outside of the school to make any recommendations or requirements. Thus it was explained by Avondale administration that there could not be any endorsement process outside of the Avondale governance structure, and that the school and its Board must be autonomous from any outside entity. This issue was returned to repeatedly throughout the session because it challenged the very purpose that the Taskforce was working on – how the world church could have appropriate input and express itself regarding its schools. From the experiences shared it was obvious that governments or accrediting bodies in different parts of the world relate to universities in different ways. And conversely, what is the best way for Adventist universities to relate to governments and their accrediting organizations? How can Adventist universities remain Adventist according to the way the Church wishes? As a partial answer to this problem, new wording was voted for Chapter III which dealt with alternative procedures proposed by divisions for relating to regional situations.

Special time was given for individuals attending from the SPD to share their perspectives on the Handbook and the processes it outlines in an “Open Forum.” There was also a report
from the TED BMTE. In addition to the discussion regarding chapter IV, aspects of Chapters VIII-XIII were also reviewed and discussed.

Friday evening the group had vespers with Dr. Ray Roennfeldt. On Sabbath morning they boarded two medium-sized buses for a trip to Sydney to visit Sydney Adventist Hospital and then worship in the Wahroonga SDA Church. On the way one of the buses had the privilege of listening to Dr. David Tasker, the author of this quarter’s Bible Study Guide for the world church, review the lesson. The other bus heard him on the way back. After lunch at the hospital, the group traveled to Sunnyside, the historic home of Ellen White when she lived in Australia. The group toured the home and the South Sea Island Museum adjacent to her home. The day closed with dinner and then vespers by Dr. Mario Ceballos.

Sunday morning after Dr. Andrew Mutero’s worship presentation, the group dived into its work again reading and updating Chapter VI (Procedures for New Programs and Institutions) and Chapter V (Procedure for Selection of a President/Dean/Chair). In the late afternoon they visited a nearby place where kangaroos roamed freely. The group then went to Lake Macquarie for a picnic supper and a lakeside worship by Dr. Gamaliel Flores.

Monday morning worship was presented by Dr. Chawngdinpuii Chanwngthu, who teaches New Testament and is Director of the Ellen G. White Research Center at Spicer Adventist University in India. Chapter VII was next on the agenda dealing with Procedure for Accreditation of Institutions and Programs.

Minor edits were made to Chapter V on the selection of the chief administrator for ministerial training schools. A small working group proposed changes to chapter VI on procedures for authorization of new degree programs and institutions that will be considered in more detail in Nairobi. Chapter VII on accreditation was moved to the appendix, since it is dealt with in detail in the AAA Handbook. A brief note about where to find this information is to be inserted at the end of chapter VI.

Several assignments were given to small groups of the Taskforce to prepare wording to be considered at the next, and final scheduled session. These assignments asked one group to continue work on chapter IV, bringing together concerns and ideas expressed at Avondale in order to present a proposed revision of Chapter IV that will point a positive and broadly acceptable way forward regarding the question of endorsement of religion/theology faculty. A second assignment asked several individuals to review chapters VIII-XIII and propose better integration with respect to learning outcomes at each level of ministerial formation and to address the concern of religion/theology professors expressed at the November Open Forum that the IBMTE Handbook focus on principles and leave details to the local field.

The final session of the IBMTE Taskforce for the revision of the Handbook will be held at the Adventist University of Africa near Nairobi in Kenya. It will take place March 9-12. This session will review the new revision of the Handbook as a whole and make any final adjustments before presenting it to the April 5, 2016 meeting of the IBMTE.