DISTINCTIVENESS AND 
IDENTITY IN A CHALLENGING 
HE ENVIRONMENT:

A Unique Opportunity for Cathedrals Group Institutions

Executive Summary
Distinctiveness and identity in a challenging HE environment: a unique opportunity for The Cathedrals Group institutions

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The Cathedrals Group
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FOREWORD

At a time of turbulence and change in every area of our core activities, it is important for every institution to recognise and re-affirm the values and activities essential to their identity. This means looking hard not just at an institution’s mission, brand and marketing or business model, but how its organisational character distinguishes it from others. It means listening to the community’s heartbeat and identifying what elements are built into its individual DNA.

The Cathedrals Group is an association of 15 universities and university colleges with Church foundations. Originally established as colleges of teacher education, each has expanded and diversified their provision into a wide range of subjects (including the arts, humanities, social sciences, business and management, sciences, professional health and social care) while maintaining a strong focus on teacher education. All our Members have teaching degree awarding powers. Several also have research degree awarding powers. Although our member institutions vary in terms of size, academic portfolio, denomination and their membership of the HE representative bodies and sector groups, we share a common faith heritage and a strong commitment to values such as social justice, respect for the individual, and promoting the public good through our work with communities and third sector organisations.

I am delighted that HEFCE recognised the value of this study not just to our member institutions, but also its relevance to the wider academic community. We thank the Council for its support and for selecting Ewart Wooldridge and Eddie Newcomb from the Leadership Foundation as consultants to the project. They were both challenging and sympathetic in working with us to reflect on how an identity and distinctiveness arising from our foundation and character could be demonstrated in our activities today.

Professor T J Wheeler DL
Chair of The Cathedrals Group and Vice Chancellor of the University of Chester
This is an executive summary of a report presented to The Cathedrals Group institutions in the spring of 2011. The report, commissioned by the Group and largely funded by HEFCE through its Leadership, Governance and Management Fund, was designed to help the Group develop a clearer understanding of the potential for their distinctiveness. The approach of the consultants, their findings and recommendations are summarized in this paper.

1. KEY MESSAGES

1.1. The consistent message emerging from the study was an absolute commitment to the quality of the student experience, built around respect for the individual, a strong sense of a caring community, and profound values based understanding of the wider purposes of universities in their immediate communities, in society, and the wider world.

1.2. In the complex landscape of HE sector representative bodies, The Cathedrals Group of 15 institutions is the only grouping overtly based on shared ethical beliefs and values. The new climate of change and market-driven competition in HE offers the institutions (individually or collectively) the opportunity to promote their values based distinctiveness and identity focused on a highly supportive approach to students and staff alike.

1.3. Many of the institutions are understandably reluctant in an essentially secular and multi-faith society to emphasize their specific Christian traditions in their promotional material. On the other hand, their senior leaders saw opportunities in terms both of positioning themselves in a competitive market place and of shaping their public stance on the wider role of universities in society against the backcloth of the new agendas for HE.

2. THE PROJECT

The project aims and objectives related to institutional distinctiveness in the following areas:

- The distinctive contribution to the student experience
- The capacity to create a positive work environment for staff
- The nature of their civic and community engagement
- Their ability to contribute to economic and social cohesion
- Their ability to respond positively to the potential scepticism about the relevance of their institutional culture in a multi-faith society dominated by secular institutions and values.

Overall, it was hoped that this would help the Group to develop a deeper understanding of their identity and to help the sector to find new insights into distinctiveness and differentiation.
2.1. The project was undertaken by the Leadership Foundation. The consultants were Ewart Wooldridge (Chief Executive of the Foundation) and Eddie Newcomb (a Key Associate of the Foundation and formerly Registrar and Secretary of the University of Manchester). A steering group under the convenorship of Professor Tim Wheeler (Vice-Chancellor of the University of Chester) oversaw the project and there was regular dialogue with the consultants.

2.2. The consultants visited eight institutions selected by the steering group, usually meeting the Governing Body Chair and the Vice-Chancellor/Principal. All the visits included focus groups, usually consisting of staff (both academic and managerial), students and representatives of the Chaplaincy. These visits were supplemented by interviews with leading figures, academic and ecclesiastical, with a special interest, including, for example, the Chair of the Church of England Board of Education and the Chief Executive and Director of the Catholic Education Service for England and Wales.

3. FINDINGS AND MAIN THEMES

The overall finding is that faith-based institutions do have distinctive features and a definable identity through:

- ‘Lived out’ core values which reflect the history and provenance of the institutions
- A special approach to students, centred on the development of the whole individual
- A particularly strong tradition of volunteering and external community engagement
- A strong sense of internal community based on personal values of trust and respect
- Vibrant Chaplaincies which are an integral part of the university or college structure and which have a very positive effect on both staff and students
- An acute sensitivity in handling change
- An approach to staff reflecting core values of individuals in a supportive community
- A distinctive approach to partnerships with other faith-based institutions

The degree of distinctiveness is largely determined by the quality of the institution’s leadership: the Chair of the Governing Body and, above all, the Chief Executive.
3.1. A key factor that has influenced distinctiveness and identity is the history of the institutions and their ‘story’. Education for its own sake runs deep in Christian thinking: Church schools, for example, were established well before the state involvement. The origins of all of the faith-based institutions lie in teacher training and service to the community; these roots run deep and form the ‘provenance’ which links the past and the present in terms of ethos and values.

3.2. Size plays a part in this ethos: it is easier to instill in a small institution a particular ethos and a sense of community and one Vice-Chancellor was clear that more than 10,000 students would make it difficult if not impossible to sustain the notion of community. Not all the institutions in the Group, however, meet this criterion and so other factors, including both high quality leadership and the Christian tradition of service to others, play their part.

3.3. There is a spectrum in the extent to which the institutions prominently display their faith-based foundation in marketing tools such as the Prospectus and the website. Roman Catholic institutions generally appear to be more confident in making their history and heritage known to prospective students. Other institutions seem more reticent, perhaps because they wish to be seen like any other institution, not seeking any special privileges and accepting competition from other institutions with different histories and cultures on their own terms. They are perhaps too coy about emphasizing their value sets. This could easily be done without over emphasis on the Christian provenance, and focusing on the importance of how they are welcoming to all faiths. This difference of emphasis is reflected within the institutions: all have chapels but Christian symbols have varying degrees of prominence.

3.4. Respondents made a distinction made between ‘espoused’ values and ‘lived’ values and the journey from one to the other. Often underpinning the distinctiveness was an awareness of the provenance of, history of, or reasons for, such positive behaviours. Here a special role is played by the Chaplaincies. One marked difference between this group of institutions and others is that the Chaplaincy is an integral part of the organizational structure, with the Chaplain usually responsible either to the Vice-Chancellor/Principal or a Pro-Vice-Chancellor. This provides a powerful link between faith-based values and day-to-day activities, especially perhaps in relation to student services. The Chaplaincy is hugely valuable to the institution and a key influence on the student experience. It is also invariably the source of a wide range of activities for students, both within the institution and outside. Students universally paid tribute to the work of the Chaplaincy staff and the way in which they enriched community life, taking a personal interest in individuals and their development from the day of their arrival.

3.5. Leadership is key to sustaining and developing a specific culture, particularly that exercised by the Governing Body and its Chair and especially the Vice-Chancellor/Principal.
• There are specific cases where the advent of a new Vice-Chancellor/Principal, supported by the Chair of Governors, has had a profound impact in re-stating the faith heritage of the institution and increasing its prominence both in terms of presentation to the world outside and of lived out values within.
• Common practice is for prospective staff to be asked at interview whether they are comfortable with the faith-based heritage and what they might offer to deepen the values of the institution. This could significantly assist the process of selection.
• Institutions in the Group regularly review their mission, values and ethos at Governing Body level.
• Whilst good communications are a feature of other kinds of institution, there as a consistent endorsement in the focus groups of the principle of openness which they saw in their senior management.

3.6. The faith-based institutions are rising to the challenge of being successful 21st century universities and university colleges whilst seeking to retain their core values and ethos: all are welcoming to students ‘of all faiths or none’ and it is particularly striking that Muslim students and their parents are happy to favour faith-based institutions where they know that faith is valued and respected. As part of the adaptation process, many in the Group have developed links with institutions with other histories and cultures, some purely secular. Such embracing of a ‘wider’ or ‘no faith’ position has taken place without undermining the Christian heritage. This flexibility of purpose allied to tenaciously sustaining core values should prove to be a great strength in the difficult times ahead.

4. LINKS WITH DIOCESAN AND NATIONAL CHURCH BODIES

4.1. All the institutions have a close relationship with their diocese, often reflected in the presence on the Governing Body of the Bishop or another diocesan officer. Two differences were observed: the Roman Catholic institutions also have links with local parishes and appear to be more closely associated with the national Church hierarchy. The Catholic Education Service for England and Wales arranges termly meetings attended by the Principals and Chairs of the Governing Bodies (and sometimes others). There is a readiness to help RC HEIs, partly because of their importance to the provision of teacher training and to their local communities, but also because of a wish to support the common good of students. The national Anglican organizations also have links with the institutions though perhaps in a less structured manner.
4.2. It might be helpful if there was an annual meeting between all the faith-based institutions and the relevant national bodies. This would buttress the unique constituencies which the institutions have and strengthen their voice. For the same reason, there may well be value if the national Anglican organizations met regularly with the institutions on the lines of the arrangements made by the Catholic Education Service.

5. THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

5.1. A key – perhaps the key – distinguishing characteristic of Cathedrals Group institutions lies in the nature of the student experience. Following the major shift in emphasis to the student as customer, consumer and funder, the high value placed on the student relationship must be a critical factor in distinctiveness to which the Group should play strongly. A consistent theme during the project was the way in which each institution supported individuals on a day to day basis and was concerned about personal values of dignity, trust and respect.

5.2. Education in the institutions concerned is aimed at developing students ‘in the round’ in order to foster their intellectual, personal and spiritual growth. There is an emphasis on ‘formation’ as opposed to ‘information’ with a view to preparing students for becoming responsible ‘global citizens’ in a complex world. The specific priorities included fairness and justice as well as diversity and equality, not just in this country but internationally. Regular reference was made too to the warm staff-student relationships and to the caring environments provided through various forms of pastoral and welfare support. The opportunities provided to students to think about their own belief systems and values were also acknowledged, another element which might be emphasized in institutions’ publicity.

5.3. The strong volunteering tradition is also important. Other universities have now developed such programmes but in the faith-based institutions these activities go back much further, arising from the notion of service to others and covering activities not simply in the local community but further afield too, including overseas. It is a way of adding to society’s social capital by those in whom social capital has been invested.

6. THE STAFF EXPERIENCE

6.1. Similar factors impinge on staff, particularly the culture of respect, dignity and trust. The general support of the Chaplaincy is seen to provide an additional dimension to welfare and well-being, particularly at times of personal crisis. However, staff were also clear that their institutions must be universities in the fullest sense of the word, serving the whole spectrum of society – ‘all faiths and no faith’: the core curriculum had to stand on its merits as elsewhere. Whilst some institutions had a particular focus on theology, the Christian tradition did not distort the overall academic offer and educational quality was of profound
importance. The background in teacher training, with a relatively smaller role for research, may well contribute to the concentration on high quality teaching and pastoral activities.

6.2 Human resources policies appear not to be framed around Christian values, but to follow accepted principles of sound HR. Nevertheless, the way in which HR policies are implemented seems to reflect the traditions of the institution and is associated with very positive values to the extent that many staff see their institution as the ‘employer of choice’ in the area. It appears to be common practice for senior staff at interview to be asked whether they sympathize with institutional values and what they might contribute. This is significant and valuable, but there is scope to carry through a similar line of questioning in staff satisfaction surveys. What current staff think about the values of the institution is at least as important.

6.3 Some thought that the overall culture of staff relations could be too ‘cosy’, and that low levels of staff turnover might be ‘unhealthy’. Given the major financial and organizational pressures facing HEIs, perhaps involving job losses, other were concerned about the difficulties of maintaining current expectations of values in staff relations. By contrast, there was also recognition that this scenario could usefully challenge a rather complacent, and overtly supportive, climate.

6.4 Finally, many top leaders believed that Christian values provided a helpful ‘compass’ for making decisions affecting staff. Whatever the strength of view about the faith-based tradition, all senior managers interviewed were adamant about the values-based philosophy of their institution.

7. COMMUNITY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

7.1. All the institutions have specific commitments to external Christian partners and stakeholder institutions, together with explicit links with Church schools and an outreach responsibility (Christian and secular) into their communities as a whole. Several are involved in founding academies, often in partnership with the diocese and others. It is another way of giving expression to the ethos of the institutions at a time when there is a sense of the growing commercialization of higher education.

7.2. The espoused ethical values influence the nature of external partnerships, where there is a powerful focus on social justice, human rights and citizenship. These values underpin the emphasis on student volunteering, with a stress on philanthropy, supporting deprived groups and engaging with the arts. In turn, the long history of student placements in denominational – and other – schools has resulted in significant community support for the institutions by a constituency of parents and ex-pupils.

All the institutions make a significant economic impact on their community/region, but no direct link appears to be made with their Church/ethics based foundation.
Whilst there are overlaps with community activities undertaken in other kinds of HEI, the evidence suggests that for two reasons it is different in nature if not in scale:

(a) Community engagement is an integral part of the philosophy and ethos of the faith-based institutions and is seen as a core part of their holistic approach to making the world a better and fairer place. This has a strong influence on the kind of community activities undertaken.

(b) The importance of community involvement is encouraged by the Churches themselves, again as an integral part of a coherent approach. (see, for example, the Church of England Board of Education 2005 report Mutual Expectations which sets out ways in which the Church and HEIs can offer mutual support or the Joint Statement of Trinity, Newman and St. Mary’s about their Catholic identity).

7.3. The relationship between Church and HEI in developing community service has different roots from the ‘third stream’ work of other HEIs and appears to be driven by a distinctive moral imperative. A particular feature is that international community activities are guided by the same motives as those for local community engagement. Given that this work is undertaken in a faith-based belief of service, it may well be that the outcomes are different qualitatively from similar activities in other institutions, but it was beyond the scope of the project to test this hypothesis. Nevertheless, The Cathedrals Group could make more of their community service in their marketing strategies. It might be particularly appealing to those who see current education policy as forcing universities down an economic and instrumental road.

8. THE FUTURE

- Faith-based institutions are different, at least in degree, from the rest of the sector and are well placed to respond to the challenges facing higher education.
- The elements of difference, qualitative and value driven, not quantitative, could be developed for the rest of the sector into a new model for determining distinctiveness as universities seek success in a highly competitive world.
- Distinctiveness is not just about individual institutions but how they relate to others. There are signs of a new form of non-geographically based clusters, focusing around cultures and values.
Faith remains of relevance in a secular world as His Holiness the Pope stressed in his address to both Houses of Parliament in September 2010 when he called for a dialogue between secular rationality and the world of religious belief for the good of civilisation. Faith-based institutions are in a strong position to contribute to such a dialogue and, in doing so, they will continue to earn the support of Government, the Funding Council, the Churches, public opinion and perhaps, above all, their students, past, present and prospective.

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Note: The full report includes an annex providing a literature survey covering the leadership of Christian HEIs and the question of distinctiveness. Both reports are available on The Cathedrals Group website: www.cathedralsgroup.org.uk
BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT THE CATHEDRALS GROUP

The Council of Church Universities and Colleges, known as The Cathedrals Group, is an association of fifteen higher education institutions with Church foundations. Originally established as colleges of teacher education, they have developed into universities and university colleges offering a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses especially in the arts, humanities and social sciences, with a particular focus on professional training for the public sector, including nursing and midwifery, social work, youth and community work, probation work and training for the health professions. We also offer programmes in subjects such as business and management, the performing arts, art and design and the sciences.

We are the only grouping in the higher education landscape overtly based on ethical beliefs and values. We continue to have close links with the three Christian Churches responsible for establishing our universities and university colleges: the Anglican Church, the Roman Catholic Church and the Methodist Church. Members share a common faith heritage and a strong commitment to values such as social justice, respect for the individual, and promoting the public good through our work with communities and third sector organisations.

Our institutions maintain a strong focus on teacher education at both primary and secondary levels. As well as providing initial professional training routes for teaching, Cathedrals Group institutions are active providers of continuing professional development. Our teacher education departments are consistently rated among the very highest categories by Ofsted and are already extensively involved in the kind of partnerships with schools that deliver the mix of academic rigour and practical skill-based training necessary to develop teachers of the highest calibre.

In 2011, a consortium of 11 members of the Cathedrals Group bid successfully to purchase the Teacher Learning Academy (TLA) from the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE). This secures the future of the TLA’s resources, providing classroom-based support for teachers to develop and evaluate their professional practice, after the expected closure of the GTCE in March 2012.

We welcome equally those from the faith communities and those of no faith. As denominational providers, we attract significant numbers of students from the Christian Churches, Islamic and other faiths. Cathedrals Group institutions wish to continue to recruit trainees who are able to become effective teachers in faith schools, including denominational schools. More than thirty per cent of all schools and colleges in England are denominational schools. One in four of all primary school teachers are trained by Cathedrals Group institutions.
There are fourteen members of The Cathedrals Group in England

- Bishop Grosseteste University College
- Canterbury Christ Church University
- Leeds Trinity University College
- Liverpool Hope University
- Newman University College
- Roehampton University
- St Mary's University College
- The University College Plymouth Marjon
- University of Chester
- University of Chichester
- University of Cumbria
- University of Gloucestershire
- University of Winchester
- York St John University

and one member institution in Wales

- Trinity Saint David University