

Distinctiveness as a route to sustainability for Higher Education Institutions (0140)**Background**

Over time the organisations in any sector tend towards isomorphism, as they respond to the same market threats and opportunities and the majority seek to emulate the successful strategies of the sector's leaders (Deephouse, 1999; Barney & Stewart, 2000). Mission statements, corporate values and visions have not only become common but show a high degree of commonality in any given sector and van Rekom suggests that "*such statements may therefore reflect what society accepts as basic principles for good management rather than being genuine expressions of the companies' fundamental identity*" (in Strandgaard Pedersen & Dobbin 1997).

In the HE sector there have been many pressures towards uniformity (Yielder & Codling, 2004; Stensaker & Norgard, 2001; Stensaker, 2007). Initially central government was content to fund the sector and leave the individual institutions to create their own distinct offerings and ways of doing things. However, as the sector grew in size, and therefore cost, governments felt the need for greater institutional accountability and central planning and control, and encouraged efficiency and cost saving. Institutions generally responded by conforming to the measurement systems imposed and becoming more similar. At the same time, institutions perceived to be successful were emulated and the emergence of league tables in the 1980s led to universities comparing themselves, not on those attributes which enabled them to claim their distinctiveness, but on the limited set used by league tables (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Boulton, 2010; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996).

However, while there are real imperatives for the trend towards uniformity, there are also cogent reasons for elaborating a distinctive strategy. Firstly, in the crowded marketplace which HE has become, distinctiveness confers a competitive advantage, enabling an institution to stand out from the crowd and be noticed by potential students and partners (Bunzel 2007). Secondly, a clear and cogent organisational identity enables those who interact with the organisation to identify with, and become loyal to, it (Dutton et al., 1994; Scott & Lane 2000; Balmer, 2008).

For the English HE sector in the early 21st century, the pressures are increasing: reductions in the number of funding sources and/or the sums available; new rules for existing HEIs; growth of private sector providers; greater competition for students; rising student expectations. In this environment, the challenge is for leaders of HEIs to find a way to respond that will ensure their institutions have a sustainable future. The starting point of the Distinct project is that an HEI needs to have a clear sense of what it is, as an organisation, and what it has to offer to its various stakeholders in order to:

- Confidently expound that offer to stakeholders
- Attract students
- Attract partners
- Give clear direction to employees
- Encourage identification with and loyalty to the institution

Research Approach

The Distinct project has been funded by HEFCE to find ways to motivate and support HEIs to consider how to identify and communicate their distinctiveness. The research phase consists of a number of qualitative and quantitative strands, placing particular emphasis on learning from outside the HE sector and exploring what approaches might be transferable.

- A literature review to assess the current state of understanding of organisational identity, both within and outside the HE sector.
- Examination of the data which are available for all or most institutions, to identify dimensions which discriminate between individual institutions or groups.
- Interviews with individuals with experience of researching, developing and communicating organisational identities. Interviewees were selected from three groups: HEIs and non-HE organisations which could be described as distinctive and agencies which specialise in the development and implementation of brand strategy.
- Development of the Action Learning Set approach as a means for institutions (as opposed to individuals) to learn.
- A survey of VCs and interviews with senior staff in HEIs to gain insights into the role of leadership in the establishment of a distinctive identity.

Findings to date

While the Distinct project is continuing until June 2012, initial findings are already being made available to the sector through a dedicated website. Among the key points are:

- The need to identify and communicate a distinctive identity has long been recognised in the commercial world and that experience can be used to inspire and inform the HE sector.
- Being distinctive is not about being unique, it is about being identifiable. The people that you wish to attract need to be able readily to identify what you stand for and what makes your institution one with which they want to associate.
- Being distinctive is more than *what* you do, it's about how you do it, why and with whom.
- A critical success factor is finding an expression of identity that works both internally and externally – one that communicates the nature of the organisation well and encourages a sense of pride in being associated with the organisation.
- Findings from the literature review and interviews with organisational leaders have been used to create a matrix tool for assessing an institution's distinctiveness. This tool lends itself to a facilitated workshop approach which encourages an institution's leadership team to share and evaluate the underlying perceptions which inform their working behaviour and decisions.

Implications and next steps

The Distinct project is developing tools and techniques aimed at positively impacting on the HE sector by contributing to the sustainability of individual institutions.

We believe that all 130 HEIs in England can be distinctive, but that not many HEIs are currently expressing what makes them, individually, special. The challenge for each institution lies in recognising the need and learning how to distil the essence of what they are and communicate

it effectively. Further, we firmly believe that being known for a distinctive identity can have an invaluable impact for an HEI; sharing your distinctive offer with the people you need to engage with, puts your HEI in a very strong position for a sustainable and productive future.

References

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