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## **Rendering unto God and Caesar: the tension between Christian principles and policies of inclusion and widening participation in a university with a Christian foundation**

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### **Background**

This research project investigated the tensions within a newly established university with a Christian foundation and government policies of widening participation and inclusion in higher education. Currently 44% of those within the age range eighteen to thirty have been engaged in some form of higher education, however, the government's target is to raise this proportion to 50% of the age group by 2010. Driven by government policy, widening participation and inclusion are therefore foremost in the strategic planning of all universities. This represents an inherent paradox for institutions with a Church of England foundation. Within the marketization of higher education and the need to secure funding from a range of resources and attract a wider range of students from a variety of faiths and none, to ensure their financial viability and meet government targets, there is also an imperative to maintain a Christian mission and ethos.

### **Research Questions**

The main research question was: What are the tensions between Christian principles and policies of widening participation and inclusion in a university with a Christian foundation?

Subsidiary questions considered whether such tensions were recognized and how they were characterized by members of the Senior Management Team and members of staff with responsibility for promoting equal opportunities and whether there were particular tensions discernible in the university's responses to government legislation on widening participation.

### **Methods**

The research methodology had two complementary approaches. The first involved interviewing key members of the university's Senior Management Team, those involved in advising and monitoring widening participation and inclusive practices within the university, the President of the Students' Union and the Chaplain. The second was analysis of documentary evidence from a range of sources, including minutes of meetings, reports and media literature. In particular, relevant reports produced by the Church of England and the Council of Church Colleges and Universities was analysed as indications of how these institutions have positioned themselves in response to government policies on higher education.

Research of a qualitative nature was adopted involving individual semi-structured interviews, in order to gain authentic insights into the views and perceptions of members of staff within the university in relation to the research question. Referring to Mason (1996) the justification for this decision was that to investigate the participants' interpretations of complex layers of meaning, values and attitudes a qualitative research design would be most appropriate as this will have 'a more fluid and exploratory character' (Mason 1996:9). Furthermore Semi-structured interviews, Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1996:236) were selected as an appropriate means by which to explore specific issues in depth. These would include an element of flexibility with some specific questions relating to the research and open-ended questions with more emphasis on the interviewee's agency to give opportunities for them to elaborate on their points of view.

In addition to data gained from interviews, documentary evidence in relation to the enquiry, both internal and external was collected and reviewed to give an in-depth context for the interview analysis, as well as a consideration that this was relevant raw data and worthy of study in its own right. In

conjunction with the interviews, it was considered that analysis of documentary evidence would add to the rich picture of the study as a whole.

## **Frame**

An interpretative approach was adopted in which the meanings and themes emerged from in depth analysis of the raw data gathered from the documents and semi-structured interviews. The initial analysis was across all interview sets using the questions as a framework. Further analysis involved open coding and selective coding as the findings emerged and were grounded in the research.

## **Research findings**

The interviews and documentary evidence identified six main themes relating to the issue of the Christian ethos of the university. One, there was discomfort with, objections to, and anxieties about the mission statement and the Christian ethos. The evidence suggested that the original mission statement was not acceptable to all the staff and through consultation, was amended by the Governing Body in recognition of this. However, the person who is actually working across the university to implement widening participation and diversity contended that support for the Christian ethos is not equal across the university and there were sensitivities towards raising concerns.

Two, uncertainty about the meaning of the mission statement. Considerable time and consultation had been expended on trying to identify and explore the differences between the university and a secular institution and to investigate what constitutes the distinctive ethos of the university. However, this would appear to be an ongoing concern that has not yet been resolved.

Three, the Christian foundation was seen as conducive to widening participation. Overwhelmingly the senior managers are positive about the Church foundation and widening participation. They identified the values of care and respect for people as being inclusive. Historical reference between the Church and education were drawn upon to demonstrate the Church's central role in the development of universities and inclusive values.

Four, the Christian foundation was problematic as to widening participation. Those interviewed whose work involved promoting widening and participation and inclusion had concerns about students from other faiths and how inclusive the university might be. This is manifest in the university title and the dominance of Christianity within the institution. Five, there were tensions between the Christian Union and the Student Union and, finally, sixth the issue of whether civil partnerships should be conducted on the university's premises.