

The Mission Statement Exercise

This tool has been created to support you in doing three things:

- Thinking about distinctiveness and how it applies to your institution
- Learning more about the distinctiveness of other institutions
- Understanding how to explore the value of distinctiveness further

"It was such a simple but compelling exercise and had such impact, I wanted to run it with my SMT"

Helen Lloyd Wildman, Pro Vice-Chancellor and Director of Corporate Services, University of Wolverhampton

What it is

The Mission Statement Exercise is a tool designed to help you to think about distinctiveness in general, and to evaluate the distinctiveness of your institution's mission statement in particular. It can be used to encourage the senior management of your institution to critically assess the mission statement as an expression of your institution's distinctiveness. In turn, this can lead to a debate about the extent and nature of your institution's distinctiveness, and the ways in which you communicate it.

No-one imagines that their mission statement says everything that there is to say about their institution, but it is important that it encapsulates not what the institution does but what its core purpose is and what it offers to stakeholders. Ideally it is a piece of communication that enables stakeholders to readily understand why they might want to engage with the institution.

So this tool enables you and your senior colleagues to understand whether your institution's mission statement does that, in an engaging way. By presenting colleagues with a series of anonymised mission statements from different institutions, you can find out (amongst other things) whether they can identify the institution they belong to, i.e. how distinctive they are.

The background

Mission statements tend to be carefully crafted statements which are arrived at in an attempt to describe the institution's objectives. However, all too often, they tend to be quite internally focused – they express what the institution does, more than the benefits that it provides to stakeholders. For example, a manufacturer of cars does not describe itself in such a literal way, when seeking to convey its core purpose. It is more likely to describe

itself as providing personal transportation options, or freedom and movement.

Furthermore, in an attempt to satisfy everyone involved in their formulation, an organisation's mission statement can end up representing the lowest common denominator, rather than the highest common factor. All too often, mission statements end up as a generic statement of what a university is for – or what a particular institution sees as the core purpose of the ideal university. As a result, most say very similar things.

If you want your university to stand out from the crowd - to give your students, staff and potential partners a reason to choose to engage with you - then your mission statement is a good place to start. Furthermore, the process of examining the mission statement encourages a dialogue about what it is that makes your institution different.

Making it work for you

1. Identify three or four institutions to compare with

There are a number of ways to consider this. You could use:

- institutions of a similar size and/or course-range as yours
- institutions in the same geographic area as yours
- other institutions which your applicants also apply to
- other institutions in the same TRAC group as yours
- institutions which yours aspires to be like

2. Get copies of their mission statements

Typically, the mission statement is in an institution's overall strategy document, but be prepared for the fact that not every institution does have a mission statement, so you may not be able to include all the institutions you have selected as comparators.

On each university's website look in the 'About' section or look for a 'Corporate Information', 'Freedom of Information', or 'Office of the VC' section. Alternatively, on most university websites there is a search bar – try the following search words: mission, corporate mission, and corporate strategy.

It isn't always easy to find!

3. Presenting the information

Cut and paste the exact words of each mission statement into a PowerPoint presentation, one per slide.

Anonymise each one (i.e. replace the institution's name with 'X', replace geographic references with '[region]' or '[city]'), but don't change any other text.

Be consistent – don't use a mission statement from one institution and a vision statement or a statement of values from another.

Alternatively, you may want to create a set of shuffle cards: cut & paste the anonymised mission statements into a Word document and then arrange it so that you can produce a set of A5 (or A6) cards, with one statement in the centre of each.

Assign each statement a number and keep a separate list of which one belongs to which institution. You may be surprised how easy it is to forget which is which.

4. *Create the opportunity for a discussion*

Think about how to ensure that you have the people you need in the room for the exercise. This is a tool that can usefully be used with, for example, a senior management team, a governing body, a strategy group, or a communications or marketing meeting.

If you are putting this as an item on a pre-existing meeting agenda, make sure that you have allowed time to:

- set the context for the exercise
- view and discuss all of the mission statements
- capture the insights that this exercise generates, and turn them into objectives

5. *Facilitating the discussion*

Introduce the exercise by explaining the objectives (see the Summary section, above).

Show the participants each mission statement in turn, asking:
“Who is confident that they know whose mission statement this is?” (people may be prepared to make a guess, but that isn't the same thing). If no-one is confident that they know whose statement it is, you could try asking whether they can tell which university mission group the institution belongs to.

The point of this is not to identify whose mission it is but to demonstrate that it isn't (or is) distinctive enough to identify the institution.

As a secondary question, ask:

“Irrespective of whose mission statement it actually is, does it reasonably accurately represent the mission of this institution?”

When you have gone through each of the comparator mission statements, show your own institution's mission statements and ask for a discussion of how well differentiated it is from those of the others – from the point of view of a stakeholder, rather than in the eyes of the people in the room (who may have been involved in formulating it).

Be prepared for a discussion of what the purpose of a mission statement is (see the 'Additional resources' section, below). At this stage, it may be useful to introduce some examples of mission statements from outside the HE sector. Try to avoid advertising slogans – they are about a product, not an organisation. And you will find that there are many poorly-differentiated mission statements in the commercial world, too, but here are a few suggestions:

- To provide a global trading platform where practically anyone can trade practically anything (eBay)
- To offer a wide range of well designed, functional home furnishing products at prices so low that as many people as possible will be able to afford them. (Ikea)
- To be our customers' favourite place and way to eat (McDonalds)

The point of this is to show that it is possible to encapsulate an organisation's purpose simply and concisely.

Next steps

- The Mission Statement Exercise is a great starting point, which can help lead you into a more in-depth investigation of what it is that makes your institution distinctive.
- See the resources in the 'understanding your organisation' section of the Distinct website for tools and techniques that can support you through the other distinctiveness

discussions you have.

- *Developing a new mission statement.* Almost every book on strategic management will at least touch on mission statements. Here are references from two, to get you started:

The Ashridge mission model sees a mission as consisting of four components:

- i. An inspirational definition of what an organisation is there for
- ii. The organisation's strategy
- iii. The policies and behavioural standards, defining how managers and employees should behave
- iv. The beliefs that constitute an organisation's culture and underpin its management style

From: *Strategic Management & Organisational Dynamics* by R. D Stacey. Prentice Hall (5th edition, 2007)

- *A strategically revealing mission statement* incorporates three elements:
 - i. Customer needs, or what is being satisfied
 - ii. Customer groups, or who is being satisfied
 - iii. The company's activities, technologies and competencies, or how the enterprise goes about creating and delivering value to customers and satisfying their needs.... One of the roles of a mission statement is to give the organisation its own special

identity, business emphasis and path for development – one that typically sets it apart from other similarly situated companies.

From: *Strategic Management, concepts & cases* by A. A. Thompson & A. J. Strickland. Irwin/McGraw-Hill (13th edition, 2003)

Additional resources

Developing mission statements:

There are likely to be many books on strategic marketing in your university's library which will include sections on mission, vision and values. If you have a business or management school in your institution, they will almost certainly lecture on mission, vision and values in organisations.

There are also books that have collated mission statements of large corporations, which might give you inspiration or demonstrate what to avoid.

One example is

- '101 Mission Statements from Top Companies' by Jeffrey Abrahams. Ten Speed Press (2007)

There are many academic papers about mission statements, but here are two that might be of interest:

- Palmer, T. B., Short, J. C. (2008) Mission Statements in U.S. Colleges of Business: An Empirical Examination of Their Content With Linkages to Configurations and Performance, *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 7(4)454–470
- Williams, L. S. (2008) The Mission Statement. *Journal of Business Communication*, 45(2)94-119

Find out more

www.distinct.ac.uk has a growing resource section.

Get involved

If you have a case study, report, or other resource you would like to share with colleagues in the sector we would love to hear from you. Please contact us at:

contact@distinct.ac.uk



If you would like to distribute this content please contact the project team.

© 2011 Distinct in Higher Education