

Supporting claims of distinctiveness

This is one of a group of topics about developing an evidence base about your institution. This evidence can be used to aid strategic planning and decision-making, and also to support the claims you may wish to make about your institution.

What this is

In the commercial world, when developing a strategy, it has been common to start with a 'situational analysis' – the 'where we are now' – using such tools as PEST(EL) and SWOT analyses.

These are approaches with which you are probably familiar and which can be found in any textbook on strategic management (a couple are suggested in the Additional resources section of this note).

This document looks at the data you need to plan for a distinctiveness strategy.

Why it's useful

In working towards a strategy for your institution you will doubtless include a phase of data collection and analysis. You are likely to have an agreed set of Performance Indicators (PIs) at the institution, and possibly also at faculty, department, and school levels. However, if your strategy had no explicit objectives of identifying and communicating distinctiveness, you may not have any PIs that measure your success in this area.

This document is intended to stimulate an attempt to consider the type of data likely to be useful for a distinctiveness strategy.

Making it work for you

1. *First define your distinctiveness*

You need an objective view of what is special about your institution. The key here is 'objective'. It can be tempting for leaders of organisations to treat their aspirations as fact.

Furthermore, a strength for an institution is not automatically a basis for distinctiveness, since it is quite probably also a strength for many other institutions.

2. *Deciding what evidence you need*

A claim to provide a better learning experience for students or a more focused approach to knowledge transfer for partner organisations needs to be backed up by evidence. There are three areas to consider for measuring such claims: inputs, outputs and outcomes. For example, ways to 'prove' a better learning experience for students might include:

- evidence that the teaching models used by staff are different or more effective than those used elsewhere (input)
- evidence that the institution invests more – or more

effective – effort than other institutions into improving the skills of its teaching staff (input)

- a higher proportion of students graduating with 1sts/2:1s (output)
- higher proportions of students on vocational courses going into relevant employment / higher proportions of students on non-vocational experience going on to research (output)
- higher proportions of students expressing the view that their course has helped them to grow as individuals (outcome)
- higher proportions of first employers expressing satisfaction with the level of skills and knowledge of graduates (outcome)

Note that evidence of a claim for distinctiveness by definition requires a comparative measure – one is attempting to prove that one is different from other institutions.

Looking at how you might provide evidence of your institution's distinctiveness may help you to sharpen up exactly what your claim is. If you can't find a measure that might provide proof that you are different from other institutions, you may need to specify your distinctiveness more precisely.

Deciding what measure(s) to use should also take into account how

convincing the evidence is to the stakeholder at whom the claim is directed – there is no point in expending resources to measure an input, output, or outcome that is not compelling to its target audience. To be able to do that, you need to understand your stakeholders well enough to be sure what is important to them and what evidence they will find compelling.

Collecting the evidence

There are likely to be two main areas of difficulty in providing evidence of distinctiveness – either a lack of data for your institution or a lack of comparative data for other institutions.

These are the reasons why institutions tend to make claims for which they have no basis – but which can't be effectively challenged because no-one else has any data either – or else make claims based on the only sector-wide data available (HESA).

With some creativity, it should generally be possible to specify and collect the data you need for your own institution (with the caveat above – not to expend resources on obtaining data that does not actually work for you). It is highly likely that comparative data will not be available for the measures which offer real opportunity to differentiate your institution. In the words of Michael Porter, 'strategy is choosing to run a different race because it's the one you've set yourself up to win'.

The important thing is to consider – objectively – whether it is likely that other institutions could make the same or similar claims.

As with much of the activity recommended by this project, it is the discussion and consideration of the issues that generates real value for the institution.

3. *Ownership and monitoring*

The things which make an institution special are also the things that enable staff to identify with it and feel pride in it. If identification of and gathering of metrics can be devolved to staff, this can help with the process of communicating internally what behaviours and activities are valued by the institution.

4. Collation of the data may remain with the institution's planning function so that data can be presented for the whole institution and made available to other stakeholders (students, partners etc) through various communication channels.

It is also important that the data should be seen to have value by the leadership of the institution. One of the primary 'mechanisms by which a leader articulates, embeds and reinforces the culture of an organisation is ... what leaders pay attention to, measure, and control on a regular basis' (Schein).

Next steps

One of the characteristics of the public sector is that there is a belief in the sharing of good practice. This is likely

to mean that if an institution identifies an opportunity to distinguish itself by emphasising a particular attribute and if that attribute is compelling to the target audience, so that the institution thrives, others may seek to imitate that success.

It is important for the sustainability of a strategy that an institution continues to monitor the external environment in which it operates, to assess the extent to which a distinctive attribute has been eroded in this manner.

Equally it is important to monitor to ensure that the attribute continues to have perceived value to its target audience.

Additional resources

Books on strategic planning that describe PEST(EL) and SWOT analyses and KPIs :

- 'Exploring corporate strategy : text and cases' (8th ed) by Gerry Johnson, Kevan Scholes, Richard Whittington. Financial Times / Prentice Hall (2008)
- 'Strategic management : awareness & change' (6th ed) by John Thompson & Frank Martin, South-Western Cengage Learning (2010)

Authors referred to in the text:

- 'Competitive advantage : creating and sustaining superior performance' by Michael E. Porter, Free Press (1985)
- 'Organizational Culture & Leadership' (3rd ed) by E. H. Schein, Jossey-Bass (2004)

Examples of KPIs in use

Note: this is a random selection and is not intended to represent best practice. If you know of an example of best practice in this area, share it with us.

<http://www.johnlewispartnership.co.uk/Display.aspx?MasterId=01e4f9d1-ed0d-435f-8006-320ce3c320ad&NavigationId=1732>

<http://www.centrica.com/index.asp?pageid=790&financial=no>

http://www.nmm.ac.uk/upload/pdf/MM_2010-'11_Q2_PubScheme_update.pdf

<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/vc/kpi.htm>

<http://www.essex.ac.uk/strategy/kpi/>

Find out more

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

Get involved

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