

Out-thinking the competition

CLAIM FOR DISTINCTIVENESS:

A unique mixture of entrepreneurial spirit and a commitment to absolute academic excellence.

THE VC'S VIEW:

“For all the claims of distinctiveness in higher education, most universities actually do roughly the same thing – although I think there is going to have to be greater differentiation in the times ahead. Our genesis was unusual – we were established in a location with no natural advantages and successive funding models hadn’t done us any favours. But this has bred a kind of fierce independence, both intellectually and financially. We have had to pioneer new ideas and ways of working. Innovation is in our blood.

“Our structure facilitates that. We have lots of schools but we don’t have a hierarchy of management, and executive responsibility lies in a few hands. This means that proposals for new ideas can be raised and evaluated quickly. We also have an extremely strong, professional administration. So we have a good supply of talented individuals who are capable of managing projects, which enables us to have a range of new ideas being progressed all the time. We tend to ‘grow our own’ administration staff rather than recruit from outside and since administration tends to be more stable than academic schools, our sense of how we do things is easier to maintain.”



PROFESSOR NIGEL THRIFT

HOW DID THEY WORK TOWARDS THEIR DISTINCTIVE IDENTITY?

In a rapidly changing environment, the university strategy has to be quite flexible – there's no point in being too specific, as things inevitably alter. This means that good ideas can be incorporated and opportunities seized as they arise.

Warwick's entrepreneurial reputation has become a virtuous circle. It attracts entrepreneurial academics, as they are more likely to find Warwick an attractive proposition and once there, carry out innovative work. Warwick gives people a lot of professional freedom; they can go to the VC with an idea and get a response.

A robust strategy consultation was agreed on by the senior management, says Ian Rowley, Director of Development, Communications and Strategy. They initiated a 'big conversation' for which they set out some parameters, and asked the university community what the strategy should be to deliver it. The conversations lasted a year and had good participation; they got about 340 submissions at different levels of scale, appropriateness and impact. Then a panel reviewed and responded to all submissions. The result, in 2007, was Warwick's first strategy document.

It contains one of Nigel's favourite phrases: "We need to out-think our competitors because we don't have their advantages or resources, we'll have to be smarter; more innovative."

WHAT DID THEY LEARN?

Warwick's approach to sincere and useful internal engagement is clear from its internal communications, which occur both horizontally and vertically across the organisation. Ian says:

"I think we were the first university to create an internal communications post (in 2001). I felt that an organisation as large, loose and broad as Warwick needed that kind of effort to connect things up.

"One thing we did was to establish the 'Ideas Café'. The café takes a theme – such as the economy or the ageing population – and invites half a dozen staff with an interest or expertise in that area, either academically or professionally, to speak for five minutes each to stimulate a discussion. We provide refreshments and set it in a 5.30 slot, to make it an out-of-work activity. We were inundated which showed us there was a real appetite for sparking inter-disciplinary debate.

"Another initiative is slightly more formal. After we produced the strategy document (called Vision 2015) there was a danger that everyone would just forget about it and go back to their normal day-to-day activities. We wanted to keep people aware of the strategy and progress on it. We were doing regular updates but we also decided to establish lunchtime sessions called 'Strategy Bites'. This gives anyone doing anything related to the strategy a platform to talk about it. They get 15-20 minutes to present their work and then everyone else can ask questions and comment."

HOW DO THEY KNOW THAT IT'S WORKING?

The Strategy Bites, according to Ian, have been really successful. "People volunteer and we suggest to various people that they might like to do one – we've never yet been turned down. In a way it's a status thing. It enables people to show that what they are doing is making a contribution to the strategy. It's not onerous, and you might get some useful feedback out of it, from colleagues that you might not otherwise get the attention of.

"This idea of encouraging people to think in terms of their contribution to the strategy seems to have taken root in that in most of the bids I see for funding, the starting point is always how the idea contributes to the strategic priorities, even though we have never set out how we want people to structure a bid."

Distinctiveness is a word that Warwick uses a lot. Originating in a discussion in Council last November, they raised the question of whether the 'Warwick way' was a strong enough proposition for the next 20 years. They have engaged a brand agency to help work through that question. Warwick believes that it has enough evidence to back up the claim that it is an innovative, ideas-generating institution and so long as they keep communicating that, it can still – at the age of 50 – be considered a maverick brand.

Ian concludes, "The downside of being successful is that people copy you; so to continue to be distinctive, you have to keep running faster. You have to accept that. If you're going to nail your colours to the mast of being distinctive you have to have a hunger for new ideas."