The Anglican Identity of the Church's higher education institutions: research report on visits to the dioceses in 2013

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Background and methodology

The prime aim of this particular aspect of the overall project is, in the words of the Bishop of Oxford's letter to his fellow bishops: "to visit the Dioceses with connections to the Anglican Higher Education Institutions [HEIs] to ascertain what links exist between Dioceses and HEIs and how the Dioceses view the roles of the HEIs." A second and related aim is the converse – the ways in which the dioceses contribute to the work of the universities.

Seventeen dioceses were identified as formally relating to one or other of the twelve universities. In the case of nine of the universities it was solely the diocese within which the university was located. Two universities each had two related dioceses and one had four. Seventeen diocesan bishops were contacted and sixteen agreed to take part in the project.

Given the nature of the project it was decided to start with the diocesan bishop himself on the grounds that it was part of his role to have an overview of the work of the diocese and so would be in a good position to assess the extent to which the respective university related to the overall mission of the diocese. Ten diocesan bishops agreed to be interviewed and in a further three dioceses a suffragan bishop was recommended by the diocesan as having a better handle on HE. There were interregna in two dioceses and so alternative arrangements were made and in one diocese the bishop delegated to two of his appropriate officers.

It was agreed that holding one-to-one interviews rather than using questionnaires would be the more appropriate and effective way of proceeding. Interviews were carried out with each of the thirteen bishops on a face-to-face basis either in their diocese or in three cases in London. Each was asked whether there was anyone else who should be contacted and all these recommendations were pursued. As a result, a further twenty-one interviews were undertaken of which eleven were by face-to-face meeting [two of which had been earlier interviews during visits to the universities], six by telephone and four by email. Of these twenty-one, two were archdeacons, eleven were either directors of education or similar, six were involved in clergy training and two represented cathedrals.

The face-to-face interviews were not recorded but notes on them were written up immediately afterwards. Following the interview and usually the next day, a more detailed report was written and these reports, along with similar reports

on the telephone interviews and copies of the email responses, have formed the confidential source documents for this report.

Two further sources of information have been used. The first was the websites of the relevant dioceses to see the extent to which their respective universities featured here. The second was the information already gathered from each of the universities regarding their perceptions of the links with their local dioceses.

As with the visits to the universities, it was emphasised that the research was a perception study asking for their frank personal views on a range of issues. What follows therefore is the researcher's perceptions of their perceptions. Although the report is written in a style that assumes that what has been reported is real, the reader should mentally preface each statement with "in the view of the person interviewed…" In judging the overall validity of the conclusions, the best test is probably the extent to which the report relates to the reader's own perceptions of the situation.

Whilst the research questions were initially polarized into the university contributing to the mission of the diocese and the diocese contributing to the work of the university, in practice the relationship between diocese and university normally had a more two-way element about it – partnerships based largely on a one-way 'you give, I take' basis are often very precarious and short lived.

The historical link between dioceses and the universities' origins as Church of England teacher training colleges was very strong [one of the colleges was a Church in Wales institution but for the sake of convenience the term Church of England is used to include Wales]. All the colleges were originally founded by the Church of England either as diocesan, National Society or central Board of Education colleges. This is still embodied in aspects of their charter documents and in representation on their governing bodies. The extent to which it still is an operational reality depends on a number of factors.

First and perhaps most significant, five of the twelve universities are now amalgamations of Church and secular foundations – Chichester, Cumbria, Gloucestershire, Trinity St David's in Wales, and Whitelands as a constituent element of Roehampton. Inevitably this dual foundation nature has implications for diocesan links and has been described as more akin to the position of Voluntary Controlled schools rather than of Voluntary Aided ones. A sixth university, Liverpool Hope, is an amalgamation of a Church of England college with two Roman Catholic ones. The other six universities either have not merged with other institutions or where they have taken on another institution they have done so on their own terms. Other factors affecting the extent to which the Church of England foundation is an operational reality include geographical location, institutional viability and personality issues.

University Governing Bodies

Having seats on the governing body, whether ex officio or through the power of nomination, has always been seen as one crucial way of ensuring an effective diocesan linkage with its university - and especially if the governor is the diocesan bishop, dean, diocesan director of education [DDE] or other senior member of the diocese. A diocesan appointee may also have an additional trustee responsibility for safeguarding the foundational purposes and church assets vested in the university.

Recently however the composition and nature of governing bodies have been changing. Driven by the Higher Education Funding Council [HEfCE], governing bodies have become smaller, ex officio places have tended to be turned into nominated ones and the percentage of co-opted places substantially increased. Behind these changes has been the desire to make governing bodies more cohesive and effective and to ensure that within their membership is contained the range of skills and experience necessary for governing a large and complex organization such as a modern university.

Although dioceses still retain significant powers of nomination to governing bodies, increasingly the request for a nomination is accompanied by some heavy advice as to the skills set needed by the person appointed in order to make up a particular skills deficit in the governing body. Occasionally one or two names may even be suggested. Often financial, legal, commercial or management skills in large organisations top the list.

As part of the retooling of slimmed down governing bodies has been the emphasis on governors' prime responsibilities being to work together as a cohesive body for the benefit of the university and that all other loyalties including those to nominating bodies should be secondary. The effect of this approach can be for diocesan nominees to 'go native' and for any reporting links back to dioceses to atrophy. There are also further consequences where a legitimate trustee role gets submerged under a mantra of corporate consensus and an anxiety about rocking the boat wins the day.

Overall the general position seems to be that dioceses will make nominations as required and advised and that once the nominee is in post there is a tacit recognition that the diocese has played its part and that there is little expectation by either diocese or the university that the governor will actively report back to the diocese in any regular systematic way. Thus an important level of linkage between diocese and university is lost.

Theology and Religious Studies

Being a source of academic expertise for the diocese in the area of theology and religious studies [TRS] is an obvious contribution that a university can make. Many have made this contribution in the past and some still do. However, shifting priorities within HE and problems over student recruitment have

already led to one university closing its TRS department and not all the others are totally secure.

It is at the level of clergy and reader training that the links have been most specific. Universities worked with dioceses to set up and run training courses and schemes which were university validated and taught by a combination of university and suitably qualified diocesan staff. Funding was available through HEfCE which enabled both university and diocese to benefit. Strong two-way operational relationships were developed which helped tie together the university and the diocese. Staff from both have been involved in teaching the courses and usually the university library and other facilities have been available to course students.

These partnerships were encouraged by the Church of England's central ministry division which was keen to improve the standing of the various courses and schemes. This was at least in part achieved. However, the funding arrangements were then changed by central government and costs previously covered by a grant now had to be met from full fee charges. Inevitably this has put pressure on diocesan training budgets and on the students attending the courses. In some cases this has led to bad feeling between diocese and university with the latter appearing to be withdrawing at least in part from its earlier involvement with the diocese. But in many cases ways were being explored which might enable aspects of the local partnerships to continue.

These collaborations are now at serious risk as a result of the Church of England's decision to go for a Common Awards arrangement. This was driven by a need to cut overall training costs and also by a concern about the variability in standards across the large range of local courses being taught. There were consortia bids made by the Church universities for the Common Awards contract but this was awarded to the University of Durham. Whilst not doubting the academic and financial wisdom of this decision, it is not clear that the inevitable collateral damage to the overall working relationships between dioceses and universities resulting from this decision was fully appreciated.

Virtually every person interviewed in each diocese that has a current training partnership arrangement with its local Church university expressed concern about the new plans and in particular about the likely resultant break up of good working relationships with its university. Sometimes this concern was expressed in a particularly animated form!

Many dioceses expressed a hope that their scheme might be able to gain 'exception status' and so continue along present lines and some thought they might be able to create enough 'wriggle room' within the new arrangements to continue at least aspects of their current partnership. But there was a general feeling of resignation that as the funding for courses was centrally managed, central control and direction was inevitable.

There was also much disquiet within the dioceses currently involved in training schemes about the way the Church universities had been side-lined. It was

suggested by several of those teaching on the courses that the Church of England centrally does not value its own universities and sees them as academically poor relations within higher education. This was put very cogently "It does seem curious that the Church has not seen this process as an opportunity to invest in and develop the Church Universities both in terms of their profile within the HE sector and their role in relation to the mission of the Church." Another said more bluntly "What is the point in having Church universities if the Church doesn't use them?"

Within the dioceses, some thought that the universities might be able to act as local agents for Durham and so continue elements of the local partnership. However, those teaching on the courses will have to go through a Durham accreditation process and it seems unlikely that this would be constitutionally or practically acceptable to the Church universities. Most of the teaching is therefore likely to be done by diocesan staff or hired-in lecturers all of whom would have to be Durham accredited. Where universities have been significantly engaged in teaching on local diocesan courses, the withdrawal of these courses will adversely affect staffing levels in the TRS departments and at worst could undermine departmental viability.

It was also noted that the Common Awards contract is only for Ministerial and Reader *initial* training. It would therefore be possible for local links to continue in the areas of ministerial professional development and lay training. However, it was thought likely that Durham would be putting together its own professional development courses and it was anticipated that most dioceses would buy into these rather than swopping provider after initial training. Running lay training courses would remain a possibility although it may well not be financially viable for the universities to pick up these 'crumbs from the rich man's table'.

There was also some scepticism within the dioceses as to whether the hoped for academic and financial benefits of the Durham managed Common Awards system will outweigh the loss of the partnership value between diocese and local Church university of the existing training arrangements.

Diocesan Boards of Education

Many Diocesan Boards of Education used to have a wide remit covering not only Church schools but also areas such as children's and youth work, further and higher education [especially chaplaincy], family life work and adult and lay training.

In 1994 the diocesan directors of education commissioned the Culham Institute to undertake a survey of diocesan boards of education in order to discover the range of their responsibilities and the methods of their working. Thirty-nine of the forty-three took part and of the remaining four, one was Sodor and Man with only one church school and the other three were between directors. The survey found that twelve Boards concerned themselves exclusively with Church schools and so were de facto schools boards. However, the other twenty-seven had

wider remits with fourteen having a concern for further education and eleven for higher education – in both cases the focus was largely on chaplaincy issues. It was usual for such Boards to have further and higher education committees and these committees ensured that the subjects remained in the diocesan mind.

The survey also asked about the links between the dioceses and the Church Colleges of Higher Education – as they then were. Eighteen dioceses reported minimal or no links whatsoever – a finding that could significantly but not wholly explained by geography as one of these dioceses had a Church college within it and five bordered a diocese containing one. In another four dioceses the reported link was solely `at governing body level and another ten explained that the links were at a very modest level. In the remaining seven dioceses [six containing a Church college and the seventh being adjacent to one] strong operational links were recorded across a range of issues but principally Religious Education [RE], Collective Worship and Church schools.

When asked about possible assistance from the Church colleges in the future, twenty-three dioceses had few or no expectations of the colleges. The general impression given by these dioceses was of largely secular institutions separated from the Church at large and of which they had few expectations.

The remaining seventeen dioceses had some future expectations of the colleges particularly in the areas of RE and Church school studies. In most cases these were dioceses which also had some existing links with one or more of the colleges. One Diocesan Director of Education was clear that the best contribution the colleges could make was to ensure that all their primary trainees were properly trained in RE. Overall however there were no really strong expectations of the colleges nor any view that the colleges had or could have any central partnership role with the DBEs in their work with schools. This section of the report ended wondering whether this perception could be changed in a positive direction.

This current inevitably more impressionistic study nearly twenty years later concludes that not only has this positive move not happened but in fact the opposite has occurred.

Schools Work

Given that all the universities grew out of colleges established by the Church of England to train teachers for its Church schools, it is not surprising that teacher initial and in-service training remains a significant part of each university's portfolio. In later years the colleges were training teachers for all types of school although the Church school aspect was always a specific component. This is therefore a likely area for collaboration between diocese and university. However, the extent to which this is actually the case seems to vary quite considerably among the universities from close to no collaboration.

The universities are training teachers for all types of school and do not always carry the expertise that relates more specifically to Church schools. Conversely diocesan education teams have themselves become more professionalized and so they have been able to carry within themselves more of the specific skill sets needed. As a result, universities frequently do not see Church schools as a significant market sector for their education departments and dioceses have become increasingly self-sufficient.

Cathedrals

The nine cathedrals which each has a Church university nearby are used by the universities in various ways. They are especially popular as degree day venues for not only do they hold the requisite large numbers of students and their parents but also they are impressive buildings contributing a sense of history and awe to the occasions. Eight of the universities use them for graduations and a ninth uses one at a slight distance away but nevertheless convenient in transport terms. Although not always recognized by those attending, as historic centres of education and learning, the cathedrals are also appropriate buildings for academic occasions and particularly so for Church universities. They are also used for more overtly religious occasions such as Commemoration Days, Advent and Christmas carol services and other high points in the lives of the universities.. Only two of the universities don't have direct links and that is largely because their nearest cathedral is too distant.

There are also some structural links. In three cases the Dean is a member of the university's governing body and in two further universities it is a cathedral canon. In one university the diocesan director of training is a joint cathedral/university appointment, the university dean of chapel is also a residentiary canon and the Vice Chancellor is an honorary canon. There are also cathedral links through the five diocesan bishops who sit on governing bodies as they have their 'thrones' in the cathedrals.

The role of individuals

Sometimes the link between university and diocese operates directly through individual action. This can be very effective if the diocesan or appropriate suffragan bishop takes a strong personal and active interest in the university – for instance two diocesans are respectively chair and vice-chair of governing bodies. Another example is a diocesan training officer who was on the staff of the university and remains an associate lecturer. In another case two senior members from the university education and the theology departments have played key enabling roles within the diocese. And no doubt there are many others. As important as this is, the downside of individual action is that when the individual leaves it may well not be replaced and so it can never be a complete substitute for institutionalized links.

A geographical mutuality

Most of the universities draw a very significant proportion of their students from their local catchment area. Their courses and residential campus ambiance appeal particularly to first generation HE students. Additionally they attract many mature students with families who are unable to move away from the area and the economic climate also encourages home living. Several people highlighted the contrast between the Church university whose catchment area was almost coterminous with the diocese and the other university within the diocese which drew students both nationally and from overseas. Whereas the latter provided a welcome addition to the local economy it was not perceived as rooted in the locality. Essentially the Church universities and the dioceses share a similar geographical territory, population and range of locality interests.

Diocesan websites

The websites of each of the seventeen dioceses were searched for references to their local Church university. The rationale for doing this was that if the university was perceived by the diocese to be a strategic part of its overall mission then it was likely that it would feature somewhere within the website.

The starting point in each case was the home page of the website. Most had a title bar near the top with several buttons each revealing a dropdown menu. Most had a Schools button and several also had one for Children and Youth. All the buttons were searched and in only two of them could any reference be found to the local university. It was almost as if what children and young people did after eighteen was of no particular relevance to the diocese. In case anything had been missed, where a search facility was available this was used. Sometimes the university was mentioned but usually buried in a news item or incidentally in the text relating to another issue. During the process of searching all the sites, the image of needles in haystacks increasingly sprang to mind!

It is unlikely of course that a deliberate decision gets taken not to include reference to the Church university in a diocesan website and much more likely that it gets excluded by default. Increasingly diocesan boards of education have become in practice diocesan boards for Church schools. Furthermore, Children and Youth Work tends to be a voluntary sector activity finishing by eighteen. Within the existing styles of diocesan website content classification, apart from one exception there simply isn't a category within which Further and Higher Education in general and a Church university in particular can fit.

Two different types of organisation

In many respects dioceses and universities are two very different types of organization. Structurally dioceses operate essentially as voluntary organisations and are substantially dependent upon their members for financial and other support. Universities are increasingly commercial organisations

accessing public money and charging fees to their customers. In the past universities were able to carry financial margins that enabled them to subsidise diocesan events and courses. Now financial tightening means they are more likely to have to charge full costs and as a result some diocesan activities which had used university premises and staff in the past have had to move elsewhere – thus weakening an operational link.

The different interests and priorities of the memberships of dioceses and universities can also lead to major areas of misunderstanding. Equal opportunities, gay rights and women's rights loom large within most student populations and sit uneasily alongside the Church's agonizing over women bishops and opposition to gay marriages.

Conclusions and implications

The main areas of current interrelationship between diocese and university have been outlined above. In terms of the future, the following issues seem to stand out as worthy of further exploration and possible action:

1. The role of Church nominated and ex officio governors is particularly important in that, as well as working alongside their fellow governors for the benefit of the university as a whole, they have an additional responsibility in relation to the Church of England origins and nature of the university. How this specific responsibility can be most effectively and appropriately fulfilled would benefit from much greater clarification.

2. Finding ways of ameliorating the unintended damage likely to be caused to theological partnership arrangements between diocese and university by the rollout of the Common Awards system emerges as an urgent priority.

3. At a time when the whole system of schooling is undergoing profound changes and the role of DBEs is becoming ever more significant, there is scope in this area for greater collaboration between dioceses and university education departments.

4. Whilst most of the dioceses have a seat at the university top table through their nominees on the university Council, there seem to be few reciprocal links at a similar level and ways of balancing this might be found.

5. Given the increasing importance of websites for communicating institutional mission, the absence of Church universities on diocesan websites is striking. If a diocese therefore wishes to bring its church university more within its diocesan fold, a very good starting point would be to ensure that the university's presence is identifiable and easily accessible via the home page of its diocesan website.