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Ruth Smith
Bethlehem Tertiary Institute

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Abstract

Many Christian tertiary educators share a passion to see holistic transformation in students' lives. This qualitative study grew out of the desire to explore whether students who are not Christ-followers, but who apply to study within an overtly Christian context, experience such change. It investigated why they chose to apply, their initial expectations, the positives and challenges of their lived experiences, and self-perceptions of any holistic change. While geographical proximity appeared to be the strongest motivator, many did experience holistic change during their time of study. The most daunting challenge appeared to be the biblical critique required in assignment and class work, the time required for that, and the stress involved. My hope is that this study might add to our understanding, and highlight ways in which educators can work more fruitfully with students who do not share our Christian faith.

Introduction

Henri Nouwen (1995) encourages his readers to "create space in which God can act and speak", suggesting that if we do, "something surprising will happen" (para. 11). Over the last several years the author has published papers relating to holistic change among Humanities' graduates doing a blended programme at a small Christian private training provider in New Zealand (Smith, 2009a; Smith, 2009b; Smith, 2010a; Smith, 2010b; Smith, 2011). While many graduates affirmed significant holistic change during their time of study, I wondered whether current and past students from all our programmes of study who did not perceive themselves as active followers of Christ, and/or were not regularly engaged in Christian community or faith practices when they applied, experienced similar transformation. Can or does a self-describing Christ-following tertiary institution provide a nurturing environment for students who do not follow Christ? How might educators demonstrate the biblical injunction to "show hospitality to strangers" (Hebrews 13:2, New Living Translation) in an authentic way?

The purpose for this qualitative study was to hear the stories and experiences – both positive and negative – of face-to-face and online students and alumni from a variety of programmes who knowingly elected to study in a Christ-following institution even though they were not active followers of Christ themselves. My aspiration was to discover ways in which Christian educators might work more meaningfully, thoughtfully and hospitably with strangers in our context, namely those who do not actively espouse our Christian faith.

Background to the Study

I teach in a small, New Zealand Christian Private Training Establishment (PTE) with programmes in Teacher Education (Secondary, Primary and Early Childhood), Counselling, and Social Work. Some of these are only offered face-to-face on campus, while others are also accessible by flexible delivery, meaning that the programme of study is primarily online, but with required on-campus teaching blocks. Some students also opt to do a mixed mode combination, studying some papers onsite and others online.

The institution's vision statement claims that it purposes to be "a relational, responsible and transformational Christ-following tertiary community." While staff members represent a variety of expressions of Christian faith, a number of students are accepted into all our programmes who have not regularly engaged in Christian community or faith practices for many years when they apply to study, if ever.

My desire was to find out some of the motivating factors that guide applicants towards tertiary providers, and particularly why someone who does not follow Christ might choose a Christian

educational setting. I wanted to find out their expectations prior to starting, and both the positives and challenges of what they then found, including the overall impact of this choice on them. Empirical observation as well as informal student feedback suggested that some at least felt their lives and understandings of God and Christian faith did change in a holistic way during their course of study, sometimes deeply and significantly so, including some who decided to follow Christ during or since their time of study, but this perception needed further verification. I also wanted to explore the experiences of those who did not become Christians while here to see whether they still felt they had changed holistically in helpful ways and the feedback from any who felt there had been no change at all.

The Literature

The literature, including a number of first-hand accounts, highlights a variety of general reasons why prospective students choose particular tertiary institutions. These can include the quality of staff, and academic reputation (Boulanger, 2005; Cockroft, 2001; Swearingen, 2000), as well as particular academic requirements for entry, which could make them either easier or more difficult to access (Moring, 2007). The pragmatics of proximity to home are frequently cited (e.g., Boulanger, 2004; Moring, 2007; Reese, 2005; Robbin, 1999), with the resultant lower costs if students actually live at home (Markoya, 2003), or the freedom to escape back to nearby family and friends as needed. In contrast, some deliberately choose to study further from home because of the freedom it affords (Heeringa, 2002).

Another key reason given for student choice is a reputation for friendliness, both from staff and students: "a small, close-knit community and friendly professors" (Dykstra, as cited in Boulanger, 2004, p. 58). Applicants are drawn to approachable and accessible staff, along with a reputation of support and care for the emotional, academic, and mental well-being of students (Moseman, 1999; Robbin, 1999; Senter, 2005). Relationships and personal growth are vital components in tertiary life: "Students are hungry for relationship" (TenElshof, 1999, p. 87, as cited Heinemann, 2005, p. 283). They are looking for a place to "fit and be able to grow spiritually, emotionally, socially and academically" (Moseman, 1999, p. 22). Personal recommendations are influential, whether from friends already at the institution in question, parents or others (Boulanger, 2004; Moseman, 1999; Robbin, 1999). A sense of fit with the values of an institution (Boulanger, 2005), high graduation and job placement rates (Boulanger, 2004, 2005; Moring, 2007), flexible options for study (Esselman, 2004), availability of scholarships (Robbin, 1999), campus size, whether large or small (Heeringa, 2002; Moring, 2007; Senter, 2005), location and safety factors (Robbin, 1999), even the climate of the area (Moring, 2007) are all also mentioned.

Why more specifically, though, might a non-follower of Christ wish to apply to an institution that aspires to be Christ-centred? For some, the reasons may be limited to those mentioned above. Some students who are not Christ-followers, however, may still be keen to explore their own spirituality in a context where that is valued, and where they feel safe to do so: "I believe now that…I am spiritual and will be much better for examining my spirituality, working with it" (Seth, 2012, p. 21). Baker (2006) agrees: "Young people who aren't Christians may be more open to consider spiritual things as they realize they don't have answers to the big questions in Life. It certainly is an important time…" (p. 4). Vogel (2000), too, sees much benefit in this:

> This process for examining our beliefs is valid for persons from any faith tradition as well as for those with no tradition at all. The key is to help people name what they believe, to look at why they believe what they claim to believe and how their beliefs connect with one another. They can then be invited to examine the assumptions that underlie their beliefs, and seek to identify the real and varied sources on which these assumptions rest. This can be an eye-opening experience. (p. 23)

Some Christian institutions have a policy to only enrol Christian students. However, not all students who purport to be Christ-followers in reality are, nor can it be assumed that even self-describing Christian students come with an understanding of Scripture, Christian faith, or a lifestyle to match (TenElshof, 2000). Thayer (2011), for example, observed that the worldview of many self-assuming Christian students at Christian colleges was really

"Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" (p. 335): Moralistic in that students espouse simple views of right and wrong; Therapeutic because they believe God is there to make their life happier; and Deists since they do not believe in having a personal relationship with God. Others, though they may not realise it, are more cultural than authentic in their Christian faith, uncritical promoters of the dominant cultural relativism of western society (TenElshof, 2000, p. 111). G. K Chesterton (d.u.) once famously quipped, "Just going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than standing in your garage makes you a car" (**http://www.thequotefactory.com/quote-by/gk-chesterton/just-going-to-church-doesnt-make/176**). Some students, however, may assume it does. Ghandi (as cited in Seth, 2012) also remarked on the inconsistencies he observed in the lives of those who claimed to follow Christ: "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ" (p. 16).

While acknowledging that Christian students may prove to be less genuine followers of Christ than they (or faculty) assumed, writers have also considered whether there may be valid reasons to include self-confessed unbelievers in a Christian tertiary educational setting, and whether in fact this could prove to be beneficial for all. Douglass (2007) argues affirmatively, since it can encourage openness, genuine enquiry and exploration inside an authentically accepting community: "There is space for openness and for not knowing. There is space for curiosity, transformation and authentic relationships" (p. 9/11). Chang (2003) assures that it can be helpful for students from all kinds of different backgrounds to explore, challenge and critique their worldviews and assumptions, not blindly espousing previous beliefs. "God's command of 'love your neighbor as yourself' needs to be understood in relation to others of all kinds – others of similarity, difference, and even opposition" (Abstract).

Cockroft (2001) actively encourages students from minority groupings to go to Christian colleges, not so much for the benefit of the few, but the many. "They need you. They need your difference" (p. 86). Ebersole and Woods (2001) agree that "diversity is healthy" (p. 214), arguing that genuine relationships between Christian and non-Christian students can result in holistic growth for both: "A relationship based on mutual love and commitment is the foundation necessary for mutual spiritual growth" (ibid, p. 194). Hagberg (2012) also affirms the value of "love reaching across boundaries and being real" (p. 54).

Having unbelievers in a group may helpfully expose to Christian students their ways of relating – whether they position as other "anyone who isn't like me," and how they respond – whether they "exclude and ignore" unbelievers, or whether they move "from hostility to hospitality" (Johnson, 2012, pp. 13-14).

There appears, however, to be a significant gap in the literature regarding what it might be like for an unbeliever to study in a Christian setting. It is hoped this study may contribute to this, and perhaps inspire others to explore this area further.

Method

Since the percentage of students coming to this institution who are not Christ-followers is relatively small, I felt it important to throw the net as widely as possible. I sought potential participants by putting invitations on our institution's Alumni Facebook page, emailing all those in the Alumni database, and putting messages into the online communication centres for all current students. The year 2013 was the twentieth anniversary of the institution's existence, and participation was sought from those involved at any point in this period. I hoped this might give some sense of longitude, presenting slices of experience which, while some might name staff members no longer serving here, or past practices, could indicate a sense of continuity of our vision and the extent to which it is being realised.

Institutional ethics approval for this phenomenological study was applied for and granted. For ethical reasons the invitation to participate excluded any students I currently teach or am likely to teach during their period of study. For reasons of confidentiality, the findings were collated by a member of our administrative team. Participant response was taken as informed consent.

The study used a Google forms survey/questionnaire, estimated to take about thirty minutes to complete. The twenty-question survey (contact Author for a copy) sought to investigate the felt experiences and reflections of current students and graduates who did not view themselves as

Christ-followers at the start of their programme. Questions included a mix of standard demographic markers, Likert scale questions, tick-box option questions, and opportunities to give more detailed answers in an un-prescribed way. They were informed both by the author's previous research (see references under Smith), or (e.g., Qs 8, 17) linked directly to what came through in the literature. Overall, the desire was to explore aspects relating to holistic change as experienced (if at all) by students and alumni not espousing Christian faith.

Respondents were asked to identify the initial factors that were influential in their choice to apply to come, and to explain more fully if any Christian aspects contributed to this. Several Likert scale questions asked participants to identify the level to which they felt this institution had influenced their faith journey, the extent to which their understanding of God or Christian faith had changed, and their view of the difficulty of the experience. They were asked to identify what they anticipated before starting in terms of the Christian ethos of the institution, and both the special and the daunting aspects they experienced initially and also later. Questions covered whether they felt they had changed in a holistic way during their period of study and if so where in their programmes this occurred, as well what they felt were key contributors to this. They were also asked whether they would choose to study at the institution again in the light of what they now know.

All 788 alumni on the database were approached, as well as most current students. Over forty replied almost immediately, but responses clearly showed that several were in fact Christ-followers when they started study, so these were separated from the others and collated elsewhere to avoid skewing the results. This resulted in 23 responses that clearly met the criteria representing onsite, online and mixed-mode students from all but one of the programmes we offer.

Definitive claims are not appropriate in qualitative research, though it is hoped the reader will find points of resonance that may prove relevant to their own situations. No formal analytical tool was used, in line with Gadamer's warnings (as cited in Sharkey, 2001) regarding reliance on pre-set standardised interpretative methods. Instead, the responses were examined in detail, and key ideas identified.

Findings

Fifteen of the 23 respondents in this study were from Teacher Education programmes, with the remainder from Counselling. Eighteen were graduates, and the rest current students. Nineteen were female. Almost half studied for the traditional three-year degree, with the majority of the remainder equally divided between two and four years of study. Two respondents had studied with the institution for more than five years. Nineteen identified themselves as NZ European, two as NZ Maori, with the others coming from Britain and Latin America. Fourteen studied on campus, with the remainder in blended programmes, and one opting for a combination of both. Nine were in the 41-55 age group, seven were aged between 26 and 40, five were over 55, one was under 25, and one chose not to specify.

It can be unusual in Christian educational settings to allow those from different spiritual backgrounds to enrol. Staff at this institution have been asked why we allow non-Christ-followers to apply, and unbelieving students are at times quizzed about why they would want to come. Six participants acknowledged that the Christian ethos and values, curiosity about Christian faith, and/or a desire to study how to integrate Christian understandings into their work were factors in why they chose to apply to our institution for their professional preparation, but generally the reasons given were much more pragmatic. The most commonly-mentioned motivator specified by twelve of the respondents was the geographical proximity of the campus to where they lived. Eight mentioned the opportunity to study from a distance by flexi, plus the institution's good academic reputation, with seven noting the draw of approachable staff. Six cited personal recommendations by current or previous students or others, the small size of the campus and lower student numbers, the opportunity to study part-time, and staff commitment levels as initial factors in their application decision. Only four of the 23 participants were influenced by the attractive rural campus, friendly reputation, or job placement rates. The supportive study environment was mentioned by only two.

In considering why those not espousing Christian faith might wish to apply to study at a Christ-

centred organisation, three main reasons were offered. Some wanted a "morals and values" dimension in their study (P.1 = quoted from Participant1), as these were very important to them either culturally or as preparation for their future role working with young learners, and which they felt were missing from other programmes. Others were at a cross-roads in their lives, having earlier rejected a Christian upbringing, but feeling it was time to re-explore faith in a different setting or, after an overseas experience, feeling they wanted to clarify what they stood for, and decide where or if God might fit in their lives: "If God was real, then I wanted him to be a part of that" (P.3). Another was intellectually curious about Christian faith, having had negative encounters before: "I felt to grow and develop I really needed to get an understanding of what being a Christian and/or having a faith actually meant" (P.23). One respondent voiced clear misgivings at the outset: "Knowing [name of institution] claimed to be a Christ-following institute made me reluctant to study there…Organisations cannot be Christ-following by definition. They can unfortunately be very religious" (P.4). In spite of these concerns, this participant still opted to apply because of its proximity to home.

When asked what they imagined the institution might be like in terms of its Christian ethos before they came, responses were wide-ranging. At least six acknowledged influential contact with current or previous students, so their expectations may relate to what they heard. The reasons for the anticipations of the others are unknown.

Expectations included having dedicated and supportive Christian faculty who "genuinely cared for their students and went the extra mile…to support them", and who "invested highly" in students' success (P.11). Also mentioned were "good old fashioned values" along with high standards and expectations of students and graduates (P.8), "low key but not pushy" Christian values (P.20), a welcoming environment and, while assuming programmes were delivered primarily "for those who follow Christ" (P.16), the expectation was that they were also available in an unpressured way to those who didn't (P.1). Some anticipated they would need their own Bible and have to "reflect on things in relation to teachings in the Bible" (P.1), or that "small parts of the Bible and Christ" (P.13) or Christian views more generally would be mentioned in lectures – but not in large amounts (P.6). Some anticipated learning "a bit about God" (P.3), "lots of praying" (P.11), and that they would be helped in coming to understand Christianity, since it "would be part of their [i.e. faculty's] Christian calling to share and teach" (P.14). Others hoped to get to know some Christians first-hand, whom they assumed would be "friendly, accepting, kind, people willing to listen and help if needed" (P.15). Some had no clear expectations, but felt from their application interview that it would be fine for them to come. One assumed it would be "rather religious", but was unworried by that (P.2). More negatively, one participant feared it might "reduce the Christian ethos to a pharisaical [sic] focus on external behaviour" (P.4), while another anticipated "a certain amount of censorship, omitting information that contradicts or debates Christian morals or theories," along with "an active disdain for sciences including the theory of evolution" (P.11). Two respondents acknowledged they were unsure what they were getting into, and were apprehensive of feeling out of their depth. They hoped they would find others accepting of their lack of biblical knowledge.

What they found at the very start of their study programmes at times matched their expectations, and sometimes challenged them. One respondent was "thrilled" at the welcome they received, and experienced no pressure "to be Christian" (P.1), while another voiced their gratitude that they had been "accepted into [institution's name] world" (P.9).

One participant commented that "the lecturers really really believe what they teach, and they are clever people so there must be some truth in it all" (P.3). The participant anticipating pharisaic attitudes felt that expectation was also realised, though acknowledged that as (s)he came to know staff more personally, (s)he found them to be "truly gracious individuals with a deep personal relationship" (P.4). Teaching staff were generally perceived to be committed and welcoming, putting these participants at ease, and "on the whole non-judgemental about other belief systems" (P.17). Expectations were indeed found to be high, but help was also provided: "the support they gave was always higher" (P.11). One participant noted a specific incident when the personal lives of staff

members did not match the Christian faith they claimed yet, in observing how this was handled, commented: "I found a place where humans exist and where love and forgiveness conquers [sic] all" (P.9).

Fellow students were mainly perceived as welcoming, helpful, "open-minded and curious" (P.17), modelling "hospitality, warmth and a positive Christian environment" (P.14), though a few were experienced as narrow-minded and intolerant: "Initially I found some dogmatic viewpoints of fellow-students very disturbing and discouraging" (P.5).

The survey asked participants to identify the main areas of challenge when they began. The aspect respondents appear to have found most challenging compared to initial expectations was the level of biblical linkage in the content of all papers as well as being a required part of assignment work. While one participant recalled "little inclusion of bible related things" (P.1), many of the others mention the level of struggle they experienced because of their lack of biblical literacy. One commented on finding "a lot more biblical underpinnings interwoven throughout all papers, which I found extremely daunting" (P.6). Another remembered initially finding: "The first year was really confusing for me, having to link biblical reading to everything" (P.12). Some felt this aspect of their study was insufficiently supported, while others appreciated helpful one-to-one conversations with faculty in this area. A suggestion was made that it "would have been helpful to have a basic guide, a word glossary of terms about Christianity" (P.14), noting the significant time factor involved in genuinely seeking to engage with unfamiliar biblical teaching. Also pointed out were the challenges of having to offer a personal, Christian perspective in assignment writing when this was outside their personal experience, resulting in at least one feeling "hypocritical" (P.18). One respondent felt this aspect was particularly "intense" (P.23), while another noted finding the institution more "fundamental" than two denominational settings (s)he had had some contact with previously (P.22).

When asked to identify aspects they found most special in the early part of their study experience, respondents included the passion, approachableness, humility and genuineness of faculty in developing students in their chosen field. Staff members that participants had particularly related to during their study years were fondly named. Shared events such as Orientation Camp and serving overseas on mission experiences were seen by some as life-altering. At least one had never seen Christian faith in such a positive light before. "I think I was quite taken with some of the Christian heroes… the leaders…who walked the talk…simple living, high thinking, lots of compassion, led by example, and had utter non-wavering faith in Jesus. That made me take real notice…" (P.14). The genuineness of the care participants received was appreciated, as was the lack of judgment and gracious acceptance by others as they tried to make sense of it all. One mentioned the specialness of the way his/her class learned to accept and encourage each other towards their goals. Another appreciated class discussions about faith, hearing how it worked for other people (P.17). Other aspects viewed as special included respect for individual beliefs (P.18), course material relating to faith (P.19), devotional times before some lectures (P.20), and a culture that discouraged gossip (P.11).

As the participants continued in their studies, they acknowledged that some faith-related aspects proved to be more daunting. Some mentioned that they were expected at different times to join in singing Christian songs, which felt very "alien and wrong" (P.11). Some were unsettled when other students prayed aloud in groups, or talked about God in everyday contexts. One viewed with displeasure the prospect of having to "listen to a whole lot of 'God' stuff" (P.8). Being asked to give a "hypothetical" Christian perspective in assignments was difficult for several (P.11). Their lack of biblical knowledge which they realised they needed in assignment writing meant that some felt "on the back foot" throughout (P.14). They were worried they might be wrong, and so lose marks. One felt his/her contribution to class discussions was not welcome since it came from a different point of view, while another acknowledged how "reticent" and "defensive" (s)he initially felt in voicing his/her beliefs (P.17). In like vein, another participant commented on how cautious (s)he was to say anything in class in case it wasn't "Christian enough" (P.3). One respondent objected to what seemed to them a very literal interpretation of the Bible, and in particular 'the Fall'. Yet another struggled with what (s)he called "magical thinking"

(P.5), feeling some classmates had a Bible verse to answer every human problem. Being a minority grouping was an unfamiliar experience for some, along with the fear that others might judge them. One bought a Bible for the first time in order to try to understand more. Another felt some students were too closed to other cultures and beliefs. Two participants voiced their sense that it was all too much, one confessing feeling "overwhelmed by it all and wondered if I would ever make sense of Christianity" (P.23).

When asked about some of the difficulties encountered from the vantage point of hindsight, as they reflected on their entire study experience, some respondents commented that people they knew both inside and outside the institution questioned why they might want to study with a dedicated Christian educational provider when they were not Christ-followers themselves. At least one found that other students tried to convert them, assuming they had "found the way and any non-Christian was lost and needed saving"– which rankled when the proselytisers' faith did not appear to translate into their lives: "I can't see how the faith they profess is helping them" (P.22). Trying to get to grips with Christian faith and perspectives in all papers reduced some to tears, and took hours of time. Some could not see the relevance of Christian faith to some subjects, finding it confusing and stressful. One failed a paper, and speculated whether it was related to the Christian perspective; another wondered whether an assignment was marked lower than it should have been because it didn't adhere to what (s)he perceived to be "the official line" (P.4). One was shocked by the differing moral standards encountered in classmates' lives; another, who became pregnant while unmarried, found some responses to her situation unhelpful and judgmental (P.11).

Regardless of the greatness of the challenges encountered, and knowing all they know now, almost two thirds of the respondents still said they would want to study at this institution again, five were unsure, and three said they would prefer to study elsewhere. One who would not wish to return mentioned the difficulty of feeling unable to "voice their true beliefs out of respect for others" (P.18), while another noted the reluctance of some state providers to take students from this institution for Practicums. Of those who were unsure, one felt "there was too much time devoted to Christianity" in the programme (P.22), another cited the increase in student numbers, perceiving this as leading to the institution becoming less personal (P.17), while a third named his/her lack of confidence at the end of the programme in facing the practical realities of being a teacher.

Of those who would gladly come again, several participants appreciated the holistic and spiritual nature of the teaching and all that they had learned. A number voiced appreciation for the variety of perspectives they encountered. One acknowledged the study had "opened me up to more points of view" (P.13), while others recognised they had become "more tolerant" (P.17), and had learned "an open and honest acceptance of others and their faiths and beliefs" (P.23). One respondent commented on the way encountering differing faith perspectives in the same institution provided a context for the practice of graciousness towards one another: "We all shared the same goal of completing our degrees even if we didn't all share the same faith or have a faith. The fact we were the same and different at the same time meant that we were able to understand what it meant to be gracious towards others" (P.16).

Other participants valued the good friends they made: "I have enjoyed the company of people who have such vastly different thinking from me" (P.22), and the professionalism, quality and support of the committed teaching staff: "I have yet to hear from graduates or current students of other institutions the level of positive comments about the commitment of lecturers like that from [name of institution]" (P.11). Some appreciated being able to study on a local campus, or more flexibly – "handy study style" (P.1), or noted the "positive environment" (P.14), and the interesting variety of assignment work. All these things appeared to make the challenges feel worthwhile.

A number of participants acknowledged the variety of ways in which they felt they had changed, both personally and in relation to others as well as God. "For me I was a 'Hard Grey Rock' [who] did not let people into my world" wrote one. "Oh, how that has changed" (P.12). Another wrote: "I still look back to [name of institution] with fond memories of how much studying there changed me and made me grow up mentally, physically and spiritually" (P.10). Yet another wrote that her time at this

institution "has had highs and lows. But I would not change anything. I have been shaped into an amazing woman who will be a positive teacher and mum always" (P.12). More specifically, different respondents acknowledged how much they had grown personally as they became more self-aware, let go of their fear of being judged by others, became kinder, grew in confidence, experienced healing in their brokenness, and knew the specialness of being part of a learning community.

Seventeen of the respondents felt their time of study at this institution had influenced their faith journey in a positive way, ten of them significantly so. Five participants claimed it had either started or reignited their personal relationship with God: "Me going to [name of institution] was me knocking…and God opened the door" (P.3). Five of the other six respondents felt they had remained unchanged in their faith journey, with one viewing the experience as having a negative effect. A more detailed exploration of these changes, including what respondents felt were key contributing factors will be the subject of a separate paper.

Discussion

I believe these findings raise several points to consider – some philosophical, and some with more practical implications – that faculty could helpfully explore.

Is there value for all students in having some unbelievers in the student body?

Both the findings and the literature (e.g., Baker, 2006; Chang, 2003; Douglass, 2007; Ebersole & Woods, 2001; Hagberg, 2012, Johnston, 2012; Vogel, 2000) seem to suggest that there can be value to all in having some genuine seekers within the student body, since it can provoke a healthy exploration among all students of currently-held beliefs and assumptions.

However, as we consider all these areas, we also need to ensure that we are fair to those who have chosen us as providers primarily if not solely because of our Christian ethos, some of whom who may be shaken to find classmates who have no interest in learning how to live christianly in their personal or professional life. This could be a fruitful area for further research.

Are we as Christian educators or institutions open to genuinely welcome students who are not Christ-followers?

While the findings showed that some of the participants were very grateful for the opportunity to study in this setting, and that some became Christ-followers through or after their time of study, not all did so, and one even felt adversely affected in relation to God. All Christian educational providers must make the fundamental decision whether to accept applicants who acknowledge from the outset that they are not Christ-followers into our programmes. If our answer is "yes", we must welcome them fully, modelling the hospitality to "strangers" that scripture regularly encourages God's people to extend (e.g., Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:19; Romans 12:13) or, as Jobe (2012) puts it, "welcoming a traveller in where they are at, walking with them, with God, while they are with us" (p. 33).

Christian providers will need to continue to monitor any parameters to that openness, and decide if all applicants are equally welcome – even those, as some of our participants were, who may have no genuine interest in anything Christian and are coming for purely pragmatic reasons, or those who come from a different faith background. The danger is real for educational establishments to lose their Christian distinctive, as some that had overtly Christian foundations illustrate (**http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/am/v2/n3/harvard-yale-princeton-oxford-once-christianT**).

Why might those who are not Christ-followers still choose to apply to study at a Christian institution?

It is probably not surprising that aspects related to Christian faith were not at the top of the list of why participants who are/were not Christ-followers chose to apply to an overtly Christian institution. In this instance, geographical proximity to home came out as the greatest application influencer, though whether a larger study would find similarly is unknown. The fact that all but one of the respondents who disclosed their age were over 25 years old may indicate they were already settled in the area, perhaps with family commitments that might make it difficult or impossible to move elsewhere. In these days of student fees, even many

younger students often elect to study close to home solely in order to save money. The strength of this desire to study locally clearly won out over any uncertainties some may have had in terms of going to a Christian provider. What they heard from others or at interview seems to have given them confidence this would still work for them.

It was encouraging in our increasingly atheistic society to see that a Christian values base was still prized by six of the participants who did not self-describe as Christ-followers. I found it exciting that curiosity about Christian faith, and learning how it might influence professional practice – which might indicate a more in-depth commitment to what the institution stands for – were seen as influential in the decision to apply by two of the respondents. While it is hoped that all those accepted for study at this institution will at very least be genuinely open to biblical teaching and understandings, it was special to realise that some applicants appeared to have had a genuine desire to engage at a more profound level.

What I found more unexpected was the finding that a supportive study environment was seen as influential by only two of the respondents in their decision to apply. As a much smaller institution than universities where students may be seen less as individuals than as numbers, I had thought the support level might be more significant as a draw card for prospective students. Fourteen of the twenty-three respondents appear to be mid-life career changers which might indicate this could be a more significant factor for them, especially as it is an area that the institution has seen as a strength. It may be that the word on the street is different to or unaware of this, or that the institution needs to reconsider whether our self-perceptions are justified.

How can we ensure that applicants who are not Christ-followers really know what they are getting into?

The findings suggest that not all participants knew what they were getting into, and that some faith-related challenges may increase with time, making it essential that staff alert applicants to this from the start. The importance of clear and honest sharing with prospective students who are not Christ-followers at time of enquiry, interview and selection cannot be overstated. It is only fair that they are given as true a picture of what student life could look like as possible. It would be important to talk through how students with no biblical knowledge or Christian experience might approach assignment work that asks for a biblical viewpoint or critique, and ensure they are aware that this is an aspect that will be marked. Respondents appear to have heard the openness of our institution to welcome them much more clearly than the reality that some others in their situation have struggled with aspects of how the Christian ethos translated into practice.

Are there ways we can better support students in biblical literacy?

The findings also indicate that support for biblical literacy among students is an area of importance for those who do not yet know Christ and potentially also for those who do. Faculty may need to consider how to help scaffold the learning of students unfamiliar with the scriptures, perhaps recommending websites to help them search for what they need. As one participant suggested, a glossary of Christian terms likely to come up in each paper may prove helpful for all. It could be useful, too, for Christian institutions to consider whether what they offer in terms of student support might include one-to-one or small group help in this area as needed.

Do we need to change our assessments in any way if we accept pre-Christian students?

If non-followers of Christ are accepted into our institutions, in all fairness teaching staff will need to consider assignment requirements from their point of view to ensure they are realistic, and perhaps at times consider including options. Participant comments suggest that it is important that we should not ask students to falsely position themselves in personal responses as if they were Christ-followers when they are not. Perhaps it is only the wording of our assignments that might need fine-tuning. There is a significant difference in how we position students, for example, when we ask: “As a Christian educator, critique….” compared to “Critique…. from a biblical perspective.”

Non-Christian students will need to know they can disagree with what they might perceive to be the party line and be genuinely honest without penalty so long as they can support their stance from the literature. The responses also indicate that working

out an appropriate balance between our coverage of needed curriculum material with our desire to include biblical perspectives and critique in class and in assignment work will be an ongoing challenge.

Christian staff and students need to be aware we are being watched.

It was clear from the responses (e.g., P.9) that participants observed with interest and perspicacity the lives and attitudes of those around them who claimed to know Christ. Positives and inconsistencies were noted at both institutional and personal levels. For example, one respondent (P.1) castigated the institution for what (s)he felt was insufficient attention to educator workload during his/her time of study, seeing it as incompatible with its Christ-following claim, while others noted moral or ethical inconsistencies in classmates and, in one instance, in a staff member. By the same token, seeing strong Christian values upheld in others' lives was also valued.

Suggestions for Further Research

The author found very little in the literature focusing on the lived experiences of unbelieving students attending Christian universities. Suggested areas for further research include how if at all studying at a Christian institution has affected the professional practice and pedagogy of unbelieving teaching graduates; and ways in which Christ-following students may feel they have grown and benefited, or been hindered because they shared their years of study with those who did/do not follow Christ.

Conclusion

This study focuses on why students who are not followers of Christ might still apply to an education provider that claims to be Christ-following, and traces their experiences – both the joys and challenges – from initial expectations to their early and subsequent lived realities. It highlights areas for faculty and administrative consideration that include the importance of clear and honest information and dialogue with enquirers and applicants, the need to support biblical literacy, to set assignment work that is manageable for the unbeliever, for Christian faculty and students to model authentic faith, and for Christ-following institutions to be clear whether or how much to open our doors to welcome professional aspirants who do not currently share our Christian faith. The opportunities are there for us to open up space for God to move, as Nouwen (1995) encouraged, and to see some at least of those who are not yet followers of Christ encounter a God who transforms lives. While we must avoid what Vogel (1991) calls "the trap of assuming that *learning about* is the same as *encountering* the living God" (pp. 80-81), our "holy hospitality" to the unbelieving student can lead to profound internal change "in the deepest places of [their] hearts by the love so freely offered" (Owens, 2012, p. 4). Let it be.

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