Christian Higher Education and Students with Diverse Beliefs: Impacts and Challenges

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Abstract

The ethos, mission, and values of Christian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are usually grounded in a biblical worldview. Increasingly, Christian HEIs are attracting students who do not share the faith espoused by the institutions they attend. This qualitative case study explored the perceptions of six final-year education students with different belief frameworks to those of the Christian HEI they attended. They were interviewed to determine their perceptions of the transparency of the ethos, mission, and values of the HEI, the impact of the HEI on their lives, and the challenges they faced as students. The data revealed some positive impacts and some challenges for both the students and the Christian HEI and identified an overarching factor that moderated the identified tensions.
Introduction

Christian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Australia are both intentional and explicit in fostering Christian ethos, mission, and values. The need to increase research output (Hemmings & Hill, 2014), economic constraints (Carey, 2014; Fletcher, 2015), and an increasing diversity in student demographics (Smith, 2014) are exerting pressure on Christian HEIs and have the potential to impact their capacity to achieve their mission (Henck, 2011). Within this context, a study was conducted to augment the limited body of knowledge regarding the interface of Christian HEIs with students of diverse beliefs.
Background

Avondale College, (hereafter referred to as Avondale) is an Australian Christian HEI that has operated since the late 19th Century. Its mission is "fostering a Christian higher education learning community that is dedicated to serving world needs." It offers undergraduate degrees in education, business, science, nursing, theology, and the arts, and postgraduate degrees to doctoral level in a variety of disciplines.

Accompanying the growth of its academic program, Avondale has increasingly attracted students from the surrounding region. While many of these students hold Christian beliefs, others have no religious affiliation, belong to a different religion, or are nominally Christian without belonging to a community of faith or claiming a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Avondale welcomes these students from diverse belief backgrounds and actively seeks ways to be inclusive and hospitable while not compromising its biblical worldview. The ethos of Avondale is openly Christian, with mandatory Christian Studies subjects and an embedded biblical worldview in its courses and extracurricular activities.

Avondale has five core values: excellence, spirituality, nurture, service, and balance. It aims for excellence, characterised by a high level of learning and discovery, "fostering creativity that blends individuality, wisdom and healthy self-evaluation" (Avondale College of Higher Education, 2015), not only in the academic program, but in all areas of its operation. Avondale values spirituality. In contrast to broader definitions of spirituality, which equate to transcendence and sacredness, connectedness, meaning, and purpose (Borgman, 2006), Avondale defines spirituality as a focus on the sacredness of God as creator, redeemer, and sustainer. This value results in the active fostering of personal relationships with God through prayer, community worship and Bible study. It also includes embedding a biblical worldview in the academic program. The third value of nurture, promotes a supportive and caring learning environment that "enhances social skills, values friendships and supports family relationships" (Avondale College of Higher Education, 2015). Avondale's fourth value, service, is supported by its motto, "For a Greater Vision of World Needs." Linked closely to an emphasis on social justice, the value of service challenges both staff and students to a greater awareness of humanitarian needs and participation in local and global projects that support people and communi-

ties. The final core value of balance promotes a holistic lifestyle that encourages equilibrium and well-being in the spiritual, mental, social- emotional, and physical aspects of life.

Purpose and Rationale

In this study, six final-year education students of diverse beliefs were interviewed. The aim of the study was to observe the college program from a new perspective, and explore the transparency of the ethos, mission, and values of Avondale. The study also aimed to discover whether the participants' perceptions of the ethos, mission, and values impacted on their personal and professional beliefs and attitudes, and what challenges they faced integrating with an overtly Christian program. This study is timely, both because there is limited research that targets this developing trend (Glanzer, Carpenter & Lantinga, 2011; Smith, 2014), and because student enrolment at Avondale is diversifying.

Literature Review

The interface between higher education and Christianity in Australia does not have a strong history (Sands & Behrens, 2012). Despite the trend for secular universities to cater for spirituality in a variety of forms and the increasing recognition that education is a moral enterprise (Bullough, 2001; Totterdell, 2000), there remains an historical disconnect between secular and Christian higher education in Australia. While some Australian universities offer degrees in theology or Christian studies, these courses function as standalone entities within a wider secular framework. There is a limited number of Christian HEIs to meet the needs of students who desire a holistic Christian higher education. Generally smaller in size than their secular counterparts, these HEIs aim to offer programs that are underpinned by a biblical worldview.

Christian Higher Education

There is rigorous discussion surrounding the nature of Christian higher education and what it should look like in practice (Anderson, 2013; Burtchaell, 1998; Glanzer, Carpenter & Lantinga, 2011; Kemeny, 2013). Current literature presents some defining characteristics that distinguish Christian HEIs from secular institutions. These include calling students to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ (Garver, 1996; Roy, 2008;

Smith, 2013), building Christian character (Smith, 2013), creating a community of faith (Cooling, 2013; Rice, 2008; Roy, 2008; Smith, 2013), fostering a commitment to service and justice (Rice, 2008; Schaffer, 2004; Smith, 2013), and basing all academic pursuits on a biblical worldview (Anderson, 2013; Cooling, 2013; Rice, 2008; Smith, 2013). These characteristics have implications for the faculty of Christian HEIs, and Anderson (2013) further elaborates that faculty should be: professing Christians, Christian intellectuals, specialists in their field, "committed to the integration of faith and learning" and "open to collegiality and personal and spiritual growth in themselves and their students" (p. 186). Lund (2010) also supports these attributes of Christian educators, while Key (2015) emphasises the importance of caring relationships in a Christian teacher education setting, with Pike (2011) further highlighting the importance of staff transparently modelling Christian values. These ideas align with Wilhoit and Rozema's (2005) notion of "anointed teaching", which proposes that the teacher's spiritual maturity becomes the defining mark of Christian education. This maturity positively impacts the relationships that exist between staff and students. Another factor that may impact relationships is class size, with students in smaller HEIs feeling more satisfied with lecturer-student relationships (Chepcheing, Mbugua & Kariuki, 2006).

While the literature concurs on the prominence of lecturers in setting the tone of a Christian HEI, other defining characteristics including a Christian curriculum and interface of faith and learning in the classroom, are also touted as important (Anderson, 2013; Cairney, Cowling & Jensen, 2011; Holland, 2014; Smith, 2013). What is taught, the worldview it represents, and the approaches taken are widely discussed in the literature (Cosgrove, 2015; Matthias, 2008; Roy, 2008; Schultz & Swezey, 2013), which presents a strong case both for intentional Bible teaching and embedding a biblical worldview in all disciplines.

Less definable than a committed Christian faculty and a Christian curriculum is the distinctive ethos of a Christian HEI. While the ethos extends to faculty and the biblical worldview embedded in the curriculum, it also includes all aspects of a Christian HEI's program and operation including extra-curricular activities, policies and procedures (Cairney, Cowling & Jensen, 2011; Roy, 2008). It embraces the holistic nature of

Christian education by advocating for a balanced life that enhances well-being (Skryzpaszek, 2011; Roy, 2008). Andreason (2005) posits that what makes a college or university Christian is the distinctive Christian perspective that is on display in the daily culture. Riley (2005) articulates the dual purpose of the ethos this way: "Students are challenged intellectually to deepen their faith in an environment that values both the life of the spirit and the life of the mind" (p. 259).

Challenges for Christian Higher Education

As western society is increasingly influenced by global uniformity and contemporary social forces, Christian HEIs are increasingly under pressure to adapt their operation as communities of faith and learning in order to survive and thrive (Obenchain, Johnson & Dion, 2004). These challenges include the pressure to engage in research and publication (Hemmings & Hill, 2014); increasing demands for government compliance (Holland, 2014), financial sustainability (Carey, 2004, Fletcher, 2015), and finally, pertaining to this study, the integration of students with diverse beliefs and lifestyles into a Christian HEI operating out of a biblical worldview. This latter point has been explored broadly by discussion on the secularisation of Christian HEIs (Burtchaell, 1998; Henck, 2011; Hirsch, 2007: Iselin, 2009) and more recently and specifically by Smith (2014). The potential tensions surrounding this issue require careful attention as Christian HEIs increasingly accept students with diverse beliefs into their programs. Several authors (Anderson, 2011; Burwell & Huyser, 2013; Smith, 2014) approach this challenge by promoting the practice of biblical hospitality; that is, welcoming others into a community of faith in a mindful way that honours each individual, regardless of their belief system.

Authentic Christianity and Students with Diverse Beliefs

The challenge of maintaining biblical worldview integrity while practising inclusive hospitality is very real. Smith (2014) has identified a significant gap in the research exploring the tensions that exist when students with diverse beliefs enrol in a Christian HEI. Her study, which involved perceptions of twenty-three past and present students attending a small Christian HEI in New Zealand, yielded a number of findings which are pertinent to this study. Although Christian students may choose a Christian HEI because they want a "university where Christian values are taught,"

where education is "filtered through a Christian worldview" (Boulanger, 2005, p. 30), and where they can be immersed in a Christian environment (Walker, 2004), Smith (2014) found that non-believing students chose a Christian HEI for more pragmatic reasons such as location. Furthermore, while she found that diversity in the student population was healthy for all concerned, she did identify some associated tensions, and highlighted the importance of offering support to students with diverse beliefs, especially in the area of biblical literacy and assessment tasks that allowed students to maintain the integrity of their own beliefs. When Christian educators articulate that "Christian Colleges should have mission statements that express their commitment to a biblical worldview and seek to implement them in all aspects of their program" (Smith, 2013, p. 91), the tensions identified by such authors should be taken seriously. The final finding from Smith's (2014) study was that students of different belief systems are continually observing and forming impressions about Christianity based on what they see and hear, both at the faculty and student level. Smith's (2014) study, while providing some direction for Christian HEIs who have an open enrolment policy, also highlights the need for further research in this area.

Method

This study was informed by three research questions:

How transparent are the Christian ethos, mission and values of Avondale to students of diverse beliefs?

What impact, if any, does the participants' perceptions of the ethos, mission and values have on their personal and professional beliefs and attitudes?

What challenges face students of diverse beliefs when enrolled in an overtly Christian program?

The participants were six final year Education students (see Table 1) enrolled at Avondale College. Participation was based on a convenience sample of students who self-identified as meeting the research criteria of a different belief system from that of the HEI, and who volunteered to participate. Ethical guidelines to protect personal identity and freedom of participation were observed at all stages of data collection. Participants were coded P1 – P6 based on order of interviews.

	Gender	Age	Accommodation	Teaching Degree
Participant 1	Female	29	Off Campus	High School
Participant 2	Female	22	Off Campus	Elementary
Participant 3	Male	23	Off Campus	Elementary
Participant 4	Female	22	On Campus	Early Childhood
Participant 5	Male	28	Off Campus	Elementary
Participant 6	Male	22	On Campus	High School

Table 1: Background information of participants

The research paradigm chosen for this study was qualitative and used a grounded theory approach (Drew, Hardman & Hosp, 2008; Neuman, 2011). The research questions informed the research design, which involved hearing and interpreting rich data in the form of personal reflection and narrative (Neuman, 2011; O'Toole & Beckett, 2010). The use of an emergent design allowed for the research to be flexible and to take consideration of the social context and the individuals' lived experiences (Creswell, 2015; O'Toole & Beckett, 2010). Each participant was invited to share a personal narrative of their Avondale experiences in a semi-structured interview. The prompts for the narrative were related to early, developing, and lasting impressions of Avondale. A second interview was conducted to seek further elaboration on points raised during the first interview. Embedded in the second interview was a short, written survey to determine the participants' perceptions of Avondale's efficacy in living up to its mission and motto. A third email interview gave respondents the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of the interview scripts and clarify responses if necessary. The data collection was deliberately structured to maintain the trustworthiness and transparency of the data (Drew, Hardman & Hosp, 2008). Care was taken to avoid influencing the responses by deliberately avoiding reference to Avondale's values during interviews.

This data collection resulted in six personal narratives. Each narrative was analysed using line by line coding to allow the data to be heard (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Key words and phrases related to Avondale's definitions of its core values and interactions with people, places, events and coursework were categorised and compacted until themes emerged from the data (Creswell, 2013). Emerging themes were shown to the participants for an accuracy check and later used

for transcript comparison. Finally, the themes from the six sets of transcripts were collated as a whole and represented by an emergent model.

Results and Analysis

The results of the interviews have been offered as a whole, rather than by participant, in an attempt to present the findings in a way that makes comparisons direct and authentic, and answers the three research questions.

The participants' reasons for choosing to study at Avondale College were pragmatic, rather than idealistic. One came on a whim, after seeing a television advertisement. Three came because of recommendations by family or friends. One came on campus by chance when looking for employment in the area and one saw it as a natural progression to follow his siblings who had previously been students there. All but two lived locally and commuted to classes. The remaining two resided on campus. All participants had favourable first impressions of Avondale College. While these were based on interactions with people rather than buildings or facilities, the physical setting was also described as "tranquil" (P5), (P5 = quoted from Participant 5) and "calm" (P1). Initially Participant Three was somewhat suspicious because everyone seemed so friendly. As the participants settled into their study programs, some expectations of campus life and studies were realised and others not, leaving them with mixed feelings. The general attitude towards Avondale College was positive as they approached the end of their four years of study.

Avondale Mission Statement "To foster a Christian higher education learning community that is dedicated to serving world needs."						
Participant Number	1	2	3	4	5	6
Score out of 10	9	9	9	9	5 or 6	8
Avondale College Motto "For a greater vision of world needs."						
Participant Number	1	2	3	4	5	6
Score out of 10	10	7	7	8	7	4

Table 2: Agreement levels with Avondale College's ability to enact its mission and motto.

Research Question One: Transparency of Ethos, Mission and Values

Participants were asked to rank how well Avondale College lived up to its mission statement and motto (see Table 2). This short survey was nested in the second interview. Clarification of wording was given on request. A score of 1 indicated no evidence of achieving its mission or motto, while a score of 10 indicated total agreement that it was achieving its mission and motto. The results indicate that with the exception of Participant 5, the students perceived that Avondale was living up to its mission. The spread of scores for achieving its motto was broader, with Participant Six ranking it at only 4/10.

The perceptions of the transparency of Avondale's values were extracted from the interview transcripts. The value of excellence was implied in the data. One participant (P6) commented that "the professional aspect of my teaching has been fantastic" and another (P3) thought that he would probably "look back a few years later and think, 'That [coursework] was really good.'" These statements align with the definition of excellence that includes a high level of learning and discovery. Although none of the participants used the word "excellence" in their interviews, it was clear that they were satisfied with their preparation for teaching and felt the strong values base had added another dimension to their teacher preparation.

All participants clearly identified spirituality as being a core value of Avondale's operation, perceiving it as a community of faith as well as learning. The Christian ethos of Avondale was identified in lectures, service learning activities, weekly forums, and worship activities, and was further evident when "lecturers begin every session with prayer and usually end every semester with prayer" (P2). One participant, however, did differentiate between spirituality and religion, feeling that he was not "spiritually challenged at Avondale" (P6), although he chose to participate in selected spiritual activities on campus, usually ones involving music. This participant did not define what he meant by spirituality but did state that he was on a journey that was detached from organized religion.

The value of nurture featured frequently in the interviews and was evident to participants mainly through interaction with students and relationships with lecturers and staff. All participants identified the value of nurture as part of Avondale's ethos. Based on Avondale's definition of nurture as providing a supportive and caring learning environment, there were many comments that supported the transparency of this value. One participant (1) noted that "everybody is friendly and nice to you" while the words, "support," "care," "friends," and "family" had a high profile in the combined narratives. Another participant noted that you "always feel welcome...nobody tries to put you down and make you feel inferior" (P2). The value of nurture featured through the relationships each participant developed. One participant noted that most lecturers and students "are just really good people that believe... [and] have just been really kind people and, like, really happy to help" (P2).

All six participants acknowledged service as a core value in Avondale's program, even though not all had engaged in service activities themselves. Two participants expressed their disappointment in not being able to participate in overseas service activities and two more acknowledged the life changes they observed in their peers who did. All saw service as a highly transparent value. Participant One noted "It really opens your eyes up to how someone else on the other side of the world lives…" and Participant Six felt his overseas service trip was "a bit of an awakening" (P6). In contrast, the value of balance was barely evident, although statements that varied experiences and relationships with people were "life changing…I gained so much self-confidence" (P1) hint at a holistic approach to education. This was articulated by just one participant (P1) who felt that her experience at Avondale had been "holistic in nature" and recommended that experiential education either in the outdoors or a third world country should be mandatory.

Research Question Two: Impacts on Personal and Professional Beliefs

From the analysis of the data generated by engagement with this question, a model was constructed of an overarching theme and four sub-themes (see Figure 1). The researchers labelled the themes: Social Connections, Spiritual Connections, Career Connections, and Intra-personal Connections with an overarching theme of Authentic Relationships. Avondale's core values were identified within these themes.
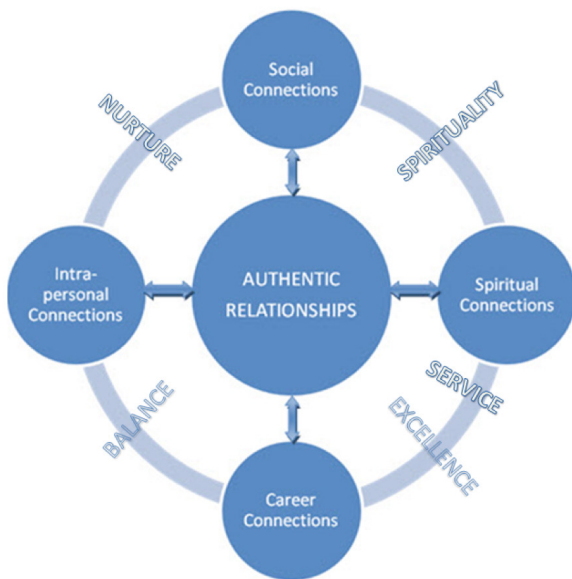
The extent to which Spiritual Connections at Avondale impacted on the students' personal beliefs is identified in Table 3 with quotes that show a varied response to the spiritual components of Avondale's program.

P	Positive impact identified	No impact, or negative impact identified
1	"God has a plan, and sometimes things can go wrong, but I'm learning that it's for a particular reason."	
2	"…helped me develop my spirituality"	"Forums felt too much like going to church"
3		"I don't go to church and a lot of that kind of stuff makes me feel uncomfortable."
4	"Worship experiences on offer …definitely have an influence…in developing a relationship with God"	
5		"I'm not one [a Christian], and I don't have any intentions of becoming one"
6		"My focus is not on God, but rather on people, it seems pointless for me to be a part of a community that focuses on him."

Table 3: Impact of Spiritual Connections on participants

Participants One, Two, Three, Four, and Six all identified Social Connections, with Participant Two referring to the Avondale community as "a really big family." Participant Six articulated, "It is exciting to live in such close quarters with so many of your peers. You are able to meet likeminded people and form new friendships with so many different people." Participant Five, however, found it challenging to form a social network with his peers and felt excluded, and Participant Three tended to only socialise with other students who were not Christians. Students who lived on-campus found it easier to make social connections than those who lived off campus.

Each participant had something positive to say about Career Connections in respect to the academic program and its efficacy in preparing them for a teaching career. Participant Six was effusive in praise for the professional aspect of the education program. Participant Two reflected, "I've learned so much and it's amazing." This participant also felt that teaching was more than transmitting knowledge; "there's also values, there's morals. That a teacher is a role model for their students and I feel that Avondale has really shown me that." Participant 3 felt that "primary teaching is run really, really well" and could see the value of all assessment tasks. Other areas that were mentioned positively were quality coursework, planning for learning, behaviour management, and special needs education. There was no criticism of the academic program in respect to career readiness.

The participants felt that Avondale had impacted their Intra-personal Connections to varying degrees with Participant Three feeling that he had not changed at all to Participant Two who felt that Avondale had influenced her lifestyle, her desire to "choose a new type of people to be with," and her relationship skills. Most felt that Avondale provided opportunities for intra-personal growth in the form of overseas teaching trips, mission trips, service trips and outdoor education trips, all of which were mentioned in the interviews.

The overarching and recurring theme of Authentic Relationships played an important role for all participants, acting as a catalyst for the sub-themes. The researchers defined Authentic Relationships as a sense of genuine care for students, which extended beyond their academic performance to an interest in their well-being and support in their personal life where appropriate, a definition which grew from the data. The names of individual lecturers occurred frequently throughout the interviews, with comments like "I've actually become close with a lot of my lecturers" (P1) and "[name of lecturer] is like a mother figure to us" (P6). Participant Three noted that lecturers took a personal interest in students and their studies. Authentic Relationships were also formed with non-teaching staff members on campus. The participants all perceived the Authentic Relationships they developed with lecturers impacted them positively throughout their courses.

Research Question Three: Challenges of Integration
Participants identified two areas of challenge for students with diverse beliefs joining a learning community comprised predominantly of Christians: Social Connections and Spiritual Connections. Regarding Social Connections, Participant One noticed that there was "a sense of separation" with students who lived on campus and off campus … "a sense that there's a bit of a clique." This is relevant considering that a higher proportion of on-campus students are Christian, compared to students who live off-campus. For one participant, this sense of not quite belonging also pervaded classes and he felt it was difficult to "jell with some of the students, because I'm from a totally different world than them…they don't really allow other people to enter their cliques" (P5). Participant Three connected mainly with other students who did not hold Christian beliefs, but Participant Four, in contrast, felt a "sisterhood and brotherhood" and grew to be very comfort-

able, a factor she attributed to living on campus.

The Spiritual Connections of Avondale challenged the participants in three ways. All participants found the embedded biblical worldview at times confusing and even confronting as they tried to process ideas that were new to them such as a personal God, sin and its consequences and personal faith. Participant Two struggled to understand how Christian authors reason. Participants Five and Six expressed some negative feelings towards compulsory Christian subjects, while the others accepted it as part of the whole educational package offered by Avondale. The second issue related to assessment tasks. Participant Two stated that assessment tasks were challenging when they had a strong Christian focus. This participant found some lecturers more flexible than others in catering for students with diverse beliefs. She estimated that her workload doubled when she had to keep looking up Christian content. On the other hand, Participant One felt that it "pushed me to learn instead of taking the easy option." The third issue involved lifestyle challenges such as the absence of a campus bar for socializing, and spiritual components of public gatherings on campus. While each participant identified challenges throughout the duration of their course, these challenges did not seem insurmountable as none of the participants said they considered withdrawing from their course at any point.

Discussion

The viewpoints of each of the participants present a snapshot of what it is like for students with diverse beliefs to study at Avondale. The participants' reasons for choosing to study at Avondale reflect Smith's (2014) findings that pragmatic, rather than philosophical reasons motivated their enrollment. It also became apparent during this study that the participants were continually observing and forming impressions of Christianity, which concurs with Smith's (2014) findings.

The agreement levels with Avondale's ability to enact its mission are, with one exception, affirming. Avondale's motto, which is written from a missiology context, may have been confusing to the unchurched mind and resulted in a broader spread of scores, although only one score could be considered low (see Table 2).

The value of excellence was implied in the data through comments pertaining to coursework, preparation for the workplace, and student support. As excellence is one way a Christian HEI can honour God, continuing attention should be given to the matter of how this value is achieved. The value of spirituality was identified by each of the participants, set within an acknowledged community of faith, a characteristic identified by several authors (Cooling, 2013, Rice, 2008; Roy, 2008: Smith, 2013). The value of nurture was common across all participants' narratives, although the extent of perceived nurture varied. The value of service was identified by all participants in their interviews. This value aligns with Smith, (2013), Rice (2008), and Schaffer (2004) who flag commitment to service and justice as important to Christian HEIs. Only one participant commented on the holistic nature of the Avondale program. There were, however, indirect references to personal growth and honouring families that hint at the value of balance in Avondale's culture. Considering the literature's perspective that Christian education be holistic (Roy, 2008; Skrzypaszek, 2011) and address the well-being of the whole person, Avondale faces the challenge of actively and openly promoting balance across all aspects of its operation.

Each participant was impacted to an extent across several areas throughout their studies at Avondale. All participants were impacted in some way by the spiritual aspects of Avondale's program and it was apparent to all participants that a community of faith as highlighted in the literature (Cooling, 2013; Rice, 2008; Roy, 2008: Smith, 2013) was visible on campus. It should be noted that the participants' personal responses to Christian spirituality varied from acceptance of the Christian faith to disengagement from personal involvement in spiritual activities. This highlights an important point: spirituality as a value may be transparent, but transparency does not guarantee that students will embrace the value, or enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ. Avondale is faced with the challenge discussed by Burwell and Huyser (2013), Smith (2014), and Anderson (2011) of presenting Christianity authentically, attractively and inclusively while honouring each individual, regardless of their worldview.

From their first impressions and throughout their course, participants identified Social Connections at Avondale with words like "friendship," "family," "brotherhood," although they did not always link these relationships to the ethos of Christian care. Two participants perceived the connectivity with others could possibly be facilitated by small class sizes, an observation compatible with the findings of Chepcheing, Mbugua, and Kariuki (2006). Lecturers in particular were perceived as contributing to this nurturing environment. In describing Avondale as welcoming and inclusive, it was apparent that the students observed Christian hospitality (Anderson, 2011; Burwell & Huyser, 2013; Smith, 2014) in practice on campus. This also aligns with Wilhoit and Rozema (2005) and Anderson (2013) who posit that staff at Christian HEIs should play a nurturing role, both in spiritual and personal matters. This nurture, however, did not extend beyond the classroom for one participant who felt a cultural disconnect with other students, and could imply that Christian hospitality was not practised as strongly by the student cohort as by the staff. A perceived difference between "them" and "us" was identified by some, but not all of the participants, with three feeling a cultural disconnect at some point in their course. As those who lived on campus enjoyed strong and positive social connections, the perceived social disconnect could also stem from interactions that were limited to classes. Whatever the reasons, similar comments from the participants in Smith's (2014) research should make the support of students with diverse beliefs in a Christian HEI an area of further consideration.

From a professional viewpoint and intrapersonal perspective, the participants generally felt they had been challenged to grow, and the emphasis on values in the teaching profession was noted. This aligns with Smith (2013) who esteems the building of Christian character in Christian higher education, and Pike (2011) who believes values should be modelled to students.

The Authentic Relationships frequently identified by the participants represent a very important finding in this study, for it was through relationships that a high level of satisfaction in terms of their overall educational experience was expressed by the participants. This concurs with the ideas of Anderson (2013), Wilhoit and Rozema (2005), Pike (2011), and Key (2015), but takes the notion further than collegiality and care and suggests that, in this study, authentic relationships held the key to integrating students with diverse beliefs

into Avondale's program, without compromising the institution's faithfulness to a biblical worldview.

Regarding the challenges these six participants encountered, the literature centred around Christian hospitality (Anderson, 2011; Burwell & Huyser, 2013; Smith, 2014) and offers a way forward in welcoming students with diverse beliefs, although the reality of dealing with diverse beliefs and lifestyles is increasingly complex and should be given thoughtful consideration.

Recommendations

It could be beneficial to further explore the moderating role of authentic relationships across a broader sample of students and in a multiple Christian HEIs. Other possibilities for study identified from the gaps in the literature and the findings from this study include a repeat of this study using a cohort of Christian students, and a sequential study to discover the impact of Avondale's ethos, mission and values on students with diverse beliefs five to ten years after their graduation.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the findings from this study indicate that for these six education students, the Christian ethos, mission and values of Avondale College were generally transparent. Excellence as a value was perceived as implicit, the values of spirituality, service and nurture were perceived as explicit in the daily culture, and the value of balance could benefit from an intentionally higher profile on campus. Furthermore, Authentic Relationships appeared to facilitate positive change self-identified by participants in relation to Social, Spiritual, Career and Intra-personal Connections which impacted the participants to varying extents.

Although the Christian ethos of Avondale created tension for some students in the areas of biblical worldview, social acceptance, lifestyle, and assessment tasks; Authentic Relationships appeared to moderate the tensions. One participant described Avondale as both "closed-off" and "accommodating" (P3), highlighting the balance point between maintaining the integrity of its Christian mission and motto, and integrating students with diverse beliefs in a sensitive and caring manner. In this study, Authentic Relationships offered a way forward to integrate students with diverse beliefs

into Avondale's program. This is a finding that deserves further exploration with representative student participants across multiple Christian HEIs. A wider study could be useful in developing a grounded theory model that has broader application.

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