Christian ethos and academic identity at a PNG University

Philip Gibbs and Jeanette Baird

Abstract

As part of a wider study on the formation and maintenance of academic identity among lecturing staff at a faith-based university in Papua New Guinea, we explore the perceived influence of an institutional Christian ethos. The wider study treated topics such as values and academia, how interviewees experience and enhance their identity as an academic, what they most and least enjoy about academic work, and possible cultural tensions between Western and local values. Our analysis in this paper focuses on responses to the research question: "What roles does a Christian ethos play in shaping your academic identity at Divine Word University?" The question was designed to elicit responses on how an institutional faith ethos and personal academic identity are viewed as related. Four broad themes were identified from academics' responses to the specific question. These themes suggest that an institutional Christian ethos is seen as shaping academics' role identities in multiple ways across three levels: on a personal level, as reinforcing academic values and academic commitment; at a community level, through contributing to creating a campus academic community; and at a national level, through framing the task of student learning as a contribution to nation building and ethical citizenship, not only to instrumental purposes of employment. We suggest that at this University, a Christian ethos helps to give shape and definition to concepts of academic identity in an environment where longstanding Western ideals of the academic profession are not well-known. Overall, for academics at Divine Word University, the institutional ethos is perceived to contribute positively to academic identity but its continuation cannot be taken for granted. We offer some proposals for improved practices that might apply to the University and to Christian higher education in other countries.

Keywords: Higher Education, Christian, faith-based, academics and identity

Introduction

The subject of academic identities has attracted much attention in the higher education literature over the past two decades (Barrow et al., 2020; Drennan et al., 2017). Among the research on academic identities in higher education, some gaps are evident: there are few accounts from academics in new and developing nations and only limited analysis of the ways in which Christian faith and academic identity are related. Similarly, the significance for academic identity of working in a faith-based institution has received only sporadic attention (for an example, see Swezey & Ross, 2012).

Some research addresses the ways in which Christian faith animates teaching and other elements of academic practice (Craft et al., 2011; Glanzer et al., 2017) or students' academic and religious identity conflicts (Baratta & Smith, 2018). However, comparatively little is known about the types of 'identity work' (Caza et al., 2018) that Christian academics engage in to integrate their religious and academic identities (James, 2003; Sullivan, 2018) or how an institutional Christian culture influences academics' construction of their academic identity. Increased understanding of how Christian academics make sense (Weick, 1995) of a Christian culture within a university or higher education institution could have significant implications for values-based teaching, professional development and fulfilment of institutional mission.

This paper offers a perspective from a young faith-based university in Papua New Guinea (PNG) of how an institutional faith ethos and personal academic identity are related at a Christian university in a developing nation. By 'ethos', we refer to an institutional rather than an individual atmosphere and culture (cf Everett, 2017), as defined in the Oxford English Dictionary (1989): "The characteristic spirit, prevalent tone of sentiment, of a people or community; the 'genius' of an institution or system".

Specifically, we explore the various ways in which academics at one faith-based institution present this relationship and how the institutional Christian ethos contributes to the 'identity work' these academics engage in to ensure a coherent narrative for their academic role identity (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). We also consider the implications of their accounts for academic and institutional development.

We suggest that an institutional Christian ethos helps to give shape and definition to the concept of academic identity for lecturers at this university, in an environment where traditional Western ideals of the academic profession are new or not well-known. Such an ethos establishes a moral code and a particular approach to students that fits with the University's Charter. There is, however, a need for the University to reinforce this ethos, to work with its academics to bolster scholarly practices, and to find ways to articulate more powerfully the complementarity of faith and reason in its values-based model of higher education.

Divine Word University in Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea, with a population approaching 9 million people, is a developing nation in Oceania with seven universities and a range of other higher education institutions. Divine Word University and Pacific Adventist University are faith-based institutions while the other five are Government or public institutions. The Preamble to the PNG Constitution recognises that the nation has two foundational principles: cultural heritage and Christianity. Recently there has been debate about whether PNG should be constitutionally recognized as a 'Christian Country' (Oge, 2020).

Divine Word University (DWU) is a Catholic university, successor of the Catholic High School, founded in 1968, and the post-secondary Divine Word Institute (DWI), co-founded in 1977, by the PNG Province of the Society of the Divine Word and the Missionary Sisters, Servants of the Holy Spirit. The first tertiary class started in 1981. DWU was recognised as a private university by the Government of PNG in 1996. Student and teaching staff numbers have gradually increased, from just several hundred students and staff on the Madang campus in 1996 to 4,235 students (including those registered for flexible learning) and 249 staff on five geographically-dispersed campuses in 2020.

Official designations aside, in 2020 all undergraduate students at DWU identified as Christian with the principal denominations being Catholic (33%), Seventh Day Adventist (19%), United Church (8%), Lutheran (7%), Assemblies of God (4%), Baptist (3%), Pentecostal (3%), and over 60 other denominations making up the remaining 23%. There is no reliable data on the religious affiliation of faculty; however, they may well follow a similar pattern to that of the students, which generally reflects the pattern from the year 2011 PNG census (National Statistical Office PNG, 2015). While the University is recognised as Christian, with a Catholic foundation, proselytizing is frowned upon and staff and students are encouraged to be active in their own churches.

Divine Word University's ethos owes much to the Divine Word Institute Charter (1977), which crafts a vision of an academic community in search of truth, with a religiously oriented and socially conscious environment as the setting for the learning experience. It draws on the charism of Saint Arnold Janssen, the founder of the Divine Word Missionaries and Sister Servants of the Holy Spirit in its emphasis on mission, service and growing together in faith and learning. The Charter places great value on providing educational opportunities for women, encouraging them to improve their status in society and to take an active part in the life of the nation.

The vision of Divine Word University is to be a national university, open to all, serving society through its quality of research, teaching, learning and community service in a Christian environment. Core values such as integrity, social responsibility, and academic excellence underlie the University's development and enliven its identity. Courses in ethics are part of all programmes.

Theoretical framework and research method

The findings reported in this paper are drawn from a wider research study exploring how academic identities are constructed, maintained, presented and adjusted at DWU.

Our theoretical perspective is interpretivist. It rests on the premise that individuals exert agency over the construction, presentation and maintenance of their identities, including whether or not they identify with particular groups, institutions or roles (Ashmore et al., 2004; Billot, 2010; Kogan, 2002). This perspective acknowledges three main strands of academic research on identity: collective, role and personal (Brown, 2015; Castelló et al., 2021). While people have a sense of themselves as individuals, or personal identity, they accept multiple identity relationships and define themselves in part by reference to their membership of collectives, such as institutions and organizational roles (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Brewer & Gardner, 1996). A person who teaches at DWU could identify themselves by references to groups based on gender, age, family, tribe or clan, parents' tribe or clan, religion, profession or occupation, status, cultural or sporting or other associations, and by reference to the institution itself. In navigating these multiple identifications, individuals engage in 'identity work', which is undertaken both to maintain a coherent sense of self-identity but also to exert relational influence (Lepisto et al., 2015; McLean & Price, 2016).

Our research for the wider study involved semi-structured interviews with academics at three campuses of DWU. A series of twenty-one questions was developed, exploring aspects of academic identity construction, individuals' personal experiences and journeys, academic values, and some broader questions on internationalisation, and Melanesian culture (Baird, Nasale & Gibbs, 2021). One of the questions asked of participants was: 'What roles does a Christian ethos play in shaping your academic identity at DWU?'. By asking such a question we were seeking to understand one facet of how academics construct their role identity in the context of a Christian university in the Catholic Tradition. In asking the question in this way, we were not assuming that interviewees necessarily identified with religion or a faith-based community. We were interested in the various ways in which interviewees explained how their sense of being an academic was influenced by the DWU context.

Interviewees ranged from senior academic managers to new junior academics. Interviewees were volunteers responding to a post on the University intranet. In all, 57 staff volunteered, comprising over a third of the total DWU academic staff, and interviews were conducted between July 2018 and May 2019 with volunteer interviewees. There were 34 interviewees from the main Madang Campus, 11 from Wewak Campus and 12 from Rabaul Campus. Three of the four interviewers were Papua New Guinean and the fourth is a long-time resident of PNG. Interviews were conducted in English, which is an additional language for most Papua New Guineans. Interviews were conducted in space offering confidentiality, such as an office, chosen by the interviewee.

The approach recognises that the discursive construction of identity occurs during research interviews, which are "interactions in which identities are created by how the researcher and participants choose to present themselves to one another" (McLean & Price, 2016, p. 54). We appreciate that the presentation of their academic identity by our interviewees hypothetically could vary depending on the interviewer. Nonetheless, we believe that our voluntary interviewees understood the somewhat formal nature of the interview process and framed their answers according to the context rather than to any social or professional relationship they had with their specific interviewer. Interviewees knew the research was about 'academic identity' but there was no assumption that interviewees themselves would be familiar with this term.

Our analysis of interview transcripts uses reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Themes for responses to the specific question were developed inductively from our various readings of the interview transcripts. Initial topics were used for early coding using QDA Miner software, with a small amount of refinement of these topics after some initial coding. From the detailed coding for each question, each of the four researchers prepared a summary of the major themes and ideas from individual questions, shared with all researchers to enable identification and discussion of significant findings. More significant and overarching themes were then identified.

Nearly all interviewees engaged readily with the interview question on the role of a Christian ethos. The term 'ethos' was new to some, who sought an explanation. However, there was little hesitation in interviewees' responses and it appears that many are used to reflecting on or discussing how Christian faith and values exist in their lives.

The findings below draw mostly on answers to the specific question about the role of a Christian ethos but also refer to themes that were present in responses to other questions, such as characteristics and values of an academic. Items in brackets indicate the interview transcript number.

How academics present the interrelationship between a Christian ethos and their academic identity

Four broad themes were identified from academics' responses to the specific question on the role of a Christian ethos in shaping their academic identities. An institutional Christian ethos is seen as shaping academics' role identities in multiple ways across three levels – personal, community and national. Firstly, such an ethos is viewed as reinforcing academic values, as well as supporting staff who individually hold strong Christian values. Secondly, and again at the personal level, it appears that the institutional ethos, personally experienced, is closely associated with academic commitment.

Thirdly, the institutional ethos is viewed as working at a community level, through contributing to creating a campus academic community that supports a collective academic identity. And fourthly, the institutional ethos is seen to influence academic identity formation at a national level, through framing the task of student learning as a contribution to nation building and ethical citizenship, not only to instrumental purposes of employment. These overlapping themes, discussed below, link with expressions of personal faith and reinforce a commitment to serve in the DWU context.

A reinforcer of personal academic values

Academia and Christianity are often presented as possessing complementary value streams, e.g. ethics, integrity and honesty, care, and holistic formation. It has been said that Christian higher education institutions have advantages when compared to secular universities, as "religion and spirituality may have a positive influence in the educational process" (Craft et al., 2011, p. 107). Christian institutions readily accept education that addresses all elements of 'head, hands and heart' and encourage the exploration of spirituality and ideas beyond the bounded rationality of humans (Echelbarger, 2018).

Generally, the institutional Christian ethos is seen as reinforcing – or helping to define – an individual's academic identity at DWU. We suggest that academic staff at DWU do not have to work hard to incorporate their understanding of Christian virtues, not exclusively Catholic, into the presentation of themselves as academics. For many, their academic role identity is permeated by the tenets of Christianity as personal values (Craft et al., 2011; Glanzer et al., 2018), scaffolded by the institutional culture.

Several respondents note how a Christian ethos applies not only to their academic role and academic excellence but to core academic values such as integrity and social responsibility: "The first and foremost thing about Christian ethos is it gives you a direction as to how to behave, how to motivate yourself in front of others, because Christian ethos brings with it a lot of good values" (KP9M).

For many staff, the values-based identity of the University shapes lecturers' and even student behaviour (WP3M). The Christian values "help me to deal with some of the challenges and to try to be Christ-like as much as possible" (MP11F). Also, one's identity is not only about what one does but situating oneself in ethical space knowing where one is coming from (James, 2003, p. 152). "The values they help me in a way. Like I said, they guide me to be a good person" (VP1F). One respondent sums up by saying that the Christian ethos "is like a signpost guiding my actions day to day" (MP3F).

A lecturer comments: "As an academic, they [Christian values] help put us in such a way that we are performing according to our ethics and according to how a professional person should behave" (VP5F). The institutional ethos, aligned to personal values, is likely to influence one's way of life on campus.

There is indirect confirmation of the influence of an institutional Christian ethos on academics' sense of a desirable identity in responses to questions in the wider study on characteristics of an academic. For example, many DWU academics mention 'integrity' as a key characteristic of an academic.

Christianity is not just about going to church. It includes the values and qualities that every human being should have (WP10M). The pursuit of social inclusion is a significant value:

> At Divine Word here we are promoting gender equality and it is making the students believe that both genders are equal and they shouldn't be look[ed] down at because they're female or because they're male or because they are disabled or otherwise. (MP4F)

The institutional Christian ethos can strengthen one to follow what one believes in (VP3F). This might be as simple as appreciating the value of punctuality and coming to class on time. But it can also enhance one's academic professionalism in terms of being open to other ways of thinking and believing. In a place like PNG where denominational lines can be strongly drawn, one has to be professional about dealing with all denominations and not just being closed minded over one's own denomination. A lecturer responds:

> It has helped me to grow and not to be narrow minded about religion, not to be narrow minded about my own little denomination and trying to force people to accept what I believe in, but to be open minded and accept also what other people believe in and make space for them to study with the Divine Word University (VP2F).

The Christian ethos also reinforces the moral code of academia. Christian principles go well with academic integrity: one is to be honest and truthful and fair and to have "academic integrity" (MP18F). DWU promotes seven core values that really mould one "to look towards not only the physical, but the spiritual aspect of being a lecturer" (WP7M).

Christian ethos and academic commitment

The DWI Charter closes with the following statement, "Let the institute be dedicated to the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity — the Divine Word", hence the name of the university after the 'Word', who according to Christian belief and the Judeo-Christian scripture is the second person in the Blessed Trinity (John 1: 1). At least one respondent recognises this and acknowledges that it is a belief that accompanies them in their life at the University. "For me, it's the Divine Word. Put God first and God is the centre of everything. And with God, nothing is impossible. It's the Divine Word, and the core values of the University" (WP5F).

The Christian ethos may be deeply internalised, as a respondent remarks " ... it's a call from my heart, I enjoy teaching these young people of Papua New Guinea. Also, I encourage them to put God first in everything they do" (KP3F). Through the Christian ethos, acknowledging God need not lead to doctrinal statements, but to committed openness to experiencing new levels of reality or new dimensions of wisdom and knowledge (James, 2003, p. 164). As one respondent notes, "we must acknowledge that true knowledge and wisdom comes from God" (MP19M).

Several respondents note how it is important to find a balance in life, combining professional identity and Christian commitment that situates one in social space. Trying to be an academic without a balanced approach to people ends up with one being a "fake academic" (16KP8F). Another sees the balance in the way of relating, adding, "I think; the Christian Ethos has enabled me to do my work well, and respect the students as they are, who they are, where they come from" (KP3F).

According to the DWI Charter, the University is not meant to be self-serving but of service to the wider community and to nation-building. The responses provide an underlying recognition that the Christian ethos helps provide a set of values, for example, humility, that touches one as an individual, but also which helps a teacher be a model not only as a teacher, but also as a mentor and guide. The Christian ethos also helps one exercise intellectual humility, recognising that a truly wise person knows what they do not know: "Being an academic to me, for me is someone who is humbled" (KP4M). Another interviewee puts it simply, "It makes you humble" (MP7F).

An established culture of 'service' (Salonda, 2008) continues to be reflected in the statements of commitment of academic staff at the University. Academics are not questioning whether DWU has a Christian ethos, as this ethos is a source of pride (McMullen, 2019).

The institutional Christian ethos motivates staff to give, no matter the circumstances, for example, as one respondent notes, stepping in for a class if someone is sick, or picking up their children from town if their parents are occupied. "We try to provide hospitality for people who are visitors" (KP5F).

Being a Christian is not a one-off event: it is a committed way of life. Commitment is important so that they can have a positive impact on the students. "I commit my day and give it to the Lord and then I find peace when I am teaching" (WP2F). The Christian ethos helps promote integrity in assessing students' work honestly. One respondent described being honest and committed as a "kind of passion" (MP27M). It is that passion that empowers one to be a maximum source of help for the students.

Academics also mention being a 'role model' for students, or having a high standard of morality, as a key academic characteristic. We suggest the importance of modelling good behaviour is likely to be strongly emphasised in faith-based tertiary education institutions, but note that the 'role model' construct is influential also in professional education (Lepisto et al., 2015), as in this comment from an education professional: "…we are to be the role models of the upcoming generation. Because if we do not do, or if we do not show that we are models then, our upcoming generation will not see the importance of who they are to be in the future" (KP2F).

Given that professions typically claim to adhere to a higher standard of moral or right conduct than the general community and seek for professionals to be role models, it seems fitting, that tempered by intellectual humility, the institutional Christian ethos will exert a powerful influence on professional education at DWU. That is, the three identities of 'Christian', 'professional' and 'academic' emerge as closely related for many DWU academic staff, as each containing ethical dimensions.

Helping to create a campus community

Scholars in their own discipline and line of teaching form their identity as individuals, but in part at least in collaboration with colleagues. Respondents noted the importance of working within a community sharing a common core of intellectual and faith commitment. One staff member expresses it as follows: "The Christian ethos is basically the guide, what I do and how I live together with my family, my friends, academic community as well as friends here" (MP25M). At DWU, collegiality and a respectful atmosphere is encouraged, which can be observed in the way staff are seen relating with each other and with students. It is "one community in a sense that we share, help each other, giving our best as if we're doing God's work" (KP9M).

Physical features of DWU as an institution are likely to influence academic staff views of the role of a Christian ethos, normalising university life as both academic and spiritual and thus reinforcing a unity of values and practices. Most academic staff at DWU reside on one of its campuses, so there is a sense that the University is also a faith-based community, and one that offers some tangible security to its members for their households. There are places of worship and a number of religious personages on campus as staff, chaplains or visitors. The chapel bell rings across the Madang Campus at 6.00am five days of the week. The environment therefore reinforces the practice of Christianity in everyday as well as academic life.

There is room for practice of denominational spirituality. One staff member who is Catholic comments, "For me, I enjoy that I can wake up in the morning and I can go to church first. You know I couldn't do that anywhere else" (MP1F). Denominational loyalties risk division among both staff and students, but, as above, denominational prejudices tend to break down in support of service to the wider DWU community. A staff member comments that they wondered how they would fit in, coming from a Lutheran background, "but when I came here I found that this University is open to all, so in other words, the University exists to serve the needs of all" (MP26M). Another says: "The bottom line is that we live as a community and that is what we are to promote more" (MP25M).

Student learning contributing to nation building

According the third decade DWU strategic plan, the University aims to graduate ethical leaders who

are inquiring, analytical and entrepreneurial, as well as capable lifelong learners. For undergraduate students in particular, the University aims to assist their formation as socially responsible citizens who contribute to nation-building by acting with integrity and respect, observing Christian values.

Interviewees describe how student formation is more than intellectual and goes beyond ethics courses: "It's not because this is a Catholic-run university and we all have to behave because of 'lotu' (religious service) but it's the person, you have to change yourself, the way you do things, you have to be more ethical" (MP31F).

One respondent adds that having Christian values "makes it possible for us as lecturers to go out and do the things that we have to do every day to try and teach this next generation about, the values of being good people" (MP23F).

The faith-based universities in PNG are reportedly regarded by employers as having distinctive identities that support their graduates in developing valuable employment skills. One interviewee notes that some in the community might even think DWU is a form of *skul bilong pater* (seminary) because of its Christian values (MP5M). A staff member draws a distinction between 'soft skills' and 'hard skills', noting how the latter come from academic training, and how soft skills are needed to produce a "complete person" who is both employable and ethical: "Soft skills play a very big role because they determine the moral and ethical values of life". The same respondent continues to say that a graduate may have all the academic qualifications, but "I want a complete person who must have the physical and spiritual balance with issues like being honest, being on time. These are the moral and ethical values that develop a person's character" (MP13M).

Staff in our study recognise that "the whole idea of a Christian leader and ethics and what we do here is really important in trying to guide young people so that they understand their responsibilities that they have" (MP9aM). Christian ethics and a Christian ethos go together so that we become respectful citizens valuing equality and human rights (MP19M). At DWU one learns to give back to society wholeheartedly, rather than "just because one is expected to do so" (MP2F). Other respondents state how Christian values are important for changing the mindset of students and how the Christian ethos influences not only academic identity, but national identity, since it is a "key to managing who we are" (KP1M).

Discussion: DWU academics' identity and the role of an institutional Christian ethos

For academics at Divine Word University, the institutional ethos is perceived to contribute positively to the maintenance of personal values and their identities as teaching academics. That is, there is good 'worldview fit' or ideological compatibility (Morris et al., 2007) between the values of academic staff and the institution. This goodness of fit stands in stark contrast to many studies of academic identity in Global North countries, where institutional logics of neoliberalism and corporatisation are felt to undermine the values and practices desired by many academics. At a time where many academics in other countries feel betrayed by their institutions and report a growing incongruence between their personal values and institutional behaviours (Winter & O'Donoghue, 2012), DWU academics largely describe a congruence between their personal values and those of their institution through the ideals of a Christian ethos.

There are, however, indications of some identity disjunctures for our interviewees between the influence of an institutional Christian ethos and their presentation of an academic identity.

While interviewees are comfortable in discussing a Christian ethos, a substantial number find it difficult or do not wish to claim the title 'academic' as part of their sense of self. This reluctance stems from a range of factors, but partly is due to the view that an academic must conduct research, which most DWU teaching staff do not. Other reasons are the comparative lack of use of the term 'academic' in PNG or because to use the term with family and friends would seem self-aggrandising. It is also possible this reticence stems from a previous colonial culture where Papua New Guinea was positioned as (eternally) needing to 'come up' to international standards.

Many interviewees did not emphasise an academic imperative of advancing knowledge through research and displayed ambivalence towards the concept of research, as an activity they 'should' engage in but were prevented from actualising. Tensions described by other writers between institutional religious identity and the pursuit of academic reputation in international rankings (Swezey & Ross, 2012), are absent currently at DWU, as the University is predominantly teaching-focused, although with aims to expand its research output.

That is, a Christian ethos is presented by DWU academic staff as fitting most readily with an academic identity focused on teaching. To this extent, the 'identity work' that DWU academics engage in to ensure a coherent narrative for their academic role identity (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) directs attention to learning and teaching and away from the conduct of research.

Despite this limitation, we suggest that DWU's Christian ethos helps to give shape and definition to concepts of academic identity in an environment where longstanding Western ideals of the academic profession are not well-known. Such an ethos establishes a moral code and a particular approach to students that fits with DWU's emphasis on education for nation-building. An earlier study on the culture of the University reached a similar conclusion:

"…the primary assumption defining DWU's practices and which influences patterns of behaviour is the ideal of service linked to the missionary commitment to social advancement. This ideal has a profound impact on the culture of DWU. It provides the impetus for people to intervene to provide a service in a context where resource security is tenuous…" (Salonda, 2008, p. xii).

Arguably, Christian values as practised in PNG could provide a means to help academics integrate their personal and academic identities. Nonetheless, academics and the University will need to be attentive to the emergence and navigation of incongruities experienced elsewhere as the University matures.

Implications for practice and further research

Reflecting on these findings, we note that the continuation of a strong institutional Christian ethos of the University cannot be taken for granted but will need to address changing societal views and expectations.

Our interviewees did not raise any of the difficult subjects for Christianity, and particularly for the Catholic church, that those in Western educational institutions might well mention if asked about the role of an institutional Christian ethos. For example, subjects such as institutional responses to sexual abuse and harassment or issues about reproductive health were not mentioned.

Another potential concern for the institutional Christian ethos at DWU is the increasing secularisation of the student body (White & Afrane, 2017). All PNG universities report that commencing students exhibit behavioural problems related to alcohol and drug use, which can be seen as a risk to ideals of student formation and to the sense of a Christian community on campus. Recent research shows that students generally choose DWU for its academic rather than its moral reputation (Gamoga & Ambang, 2020), although some students of faith, or their parents, do choose DWU for its reputation as an institution with Christian values.

More broadly, we suggest that further generative conversations (Rizzi, 2019) among groups of academics on how a Christian ethos shapes their own identities could provide a springboard for stronger learning and teaching at DWU, as well as for higher education institutions operating in post-colonial PNG and Pacific Christian contexts. Academic staff could be better equipped from the time of their induction (Billot & King, 2017) to explain to students the worth of genuine scholarly effort for their practice of 'right action' and 'integrity' in a Christian learning environment in a Western tradition. We note, however, that staff and students need to navigate their understandings across different domains, as a Christian approach to 'right action' could be counter-cultural in Melanesian formal, cultural and familial situations.

Moreover, the University's senior management could intentionally seek to strengthen academics' scholarly and research practices consistent with – rather than in opposition to – these same academics'

Christian moral foundations in their teaching practice. There is no inherent contradiction for academic identity in being a 'good Christian teacher' and a 'research competent academic', although the University should remain alert to potential academic and institutional identity challenges such as financial pressures and the dynamics of power in society, that favour the privileged, or trends that might cause the University to be indistinguishable from secular counterparts.

DWU has opportunities to articulate more powerfully the complementarity of faith and reason in its values-based model of higher education. This model is known to be valued in PNG, and arguably should be elsewhere, given increasing disenchantment with corporatised, business-focused universities (Glanzer et al., 2017; Sullivan, 2019).

As a caveat to this study, we note that much previous research on identities has been based on Western concepts of individualism and, for academia, 'prestige economies' (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011). The extent to which theories of identity developed elsewhere are relevant for collectivist societies with communitarian epistemology such as PNG is yet to be tested. We recognise also the distinctive role played by Christianity in Pacific colonialism and post-colonial development (Ernst, 2012). Because of this, our academics' accounts of the shaping role of a Christian ethos can be expected to differ from expected Global North presentations of Christian academic identity (Sullivan, 2009; Baratta & Smith, 2018). At the same time, this difference in perspective contributes to a more comprehensive worldwide understanding of the engagement between faith-based values and academic identities in higher education.

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About the authors

Philip Gibbs is President of Divine Word University and Professor of Social Research. He is a Divine Word Missionary priest and has served in various capacities in Papua New Guinea since 1973. He holds a Post-graduate diploma in Anthropology from Sydney University, an MBA from Divine Word University, and a doctorate in Fundamental Theology from the Gregorian University, Rome.

Jeanette Baird is Adjunct Professor of Higher Education at Divine Word University. She is a higher education consultant specialising in quality assurance and university governance. She holds the degrees of BA (Hons) and BLitt from the University of Melbourne, an MBA from RMIT University and a PhD from the University of New England in Australia.

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